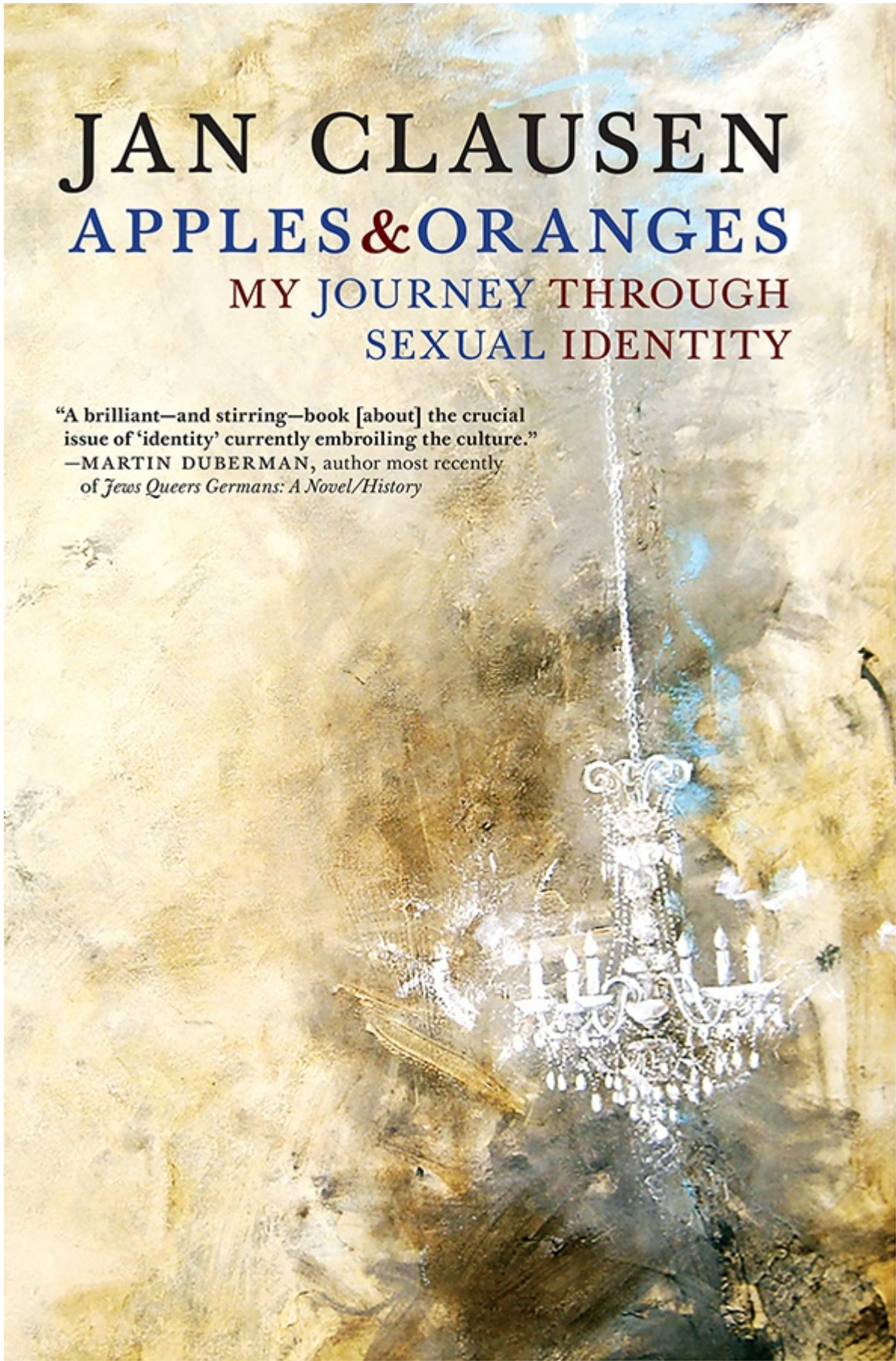


The background of the book cover is an abstract painting. It features a palette of warm, earthy tones including beige, tan, and brown, with some cooler blue and grey accents. The texture is visible, suggesting brushstrokes and layered paint. In the lower right quadrant, there is a detailed, white, ornate chandelier hanging from a thin chain. The chandelier has multiple tiers and candle-like lights. The overall composition is vertical and evokes a sense of depth and complexity.

JAN CLAUSEN

APPLES & ORANGES

MY JOURNEY THROUGH SEXUAL IDENTITY

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—MARTIN DUBERMAN, author most recently of *Jews Queers Germans: A Novel/History*

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APPLES & ORANGES

MY JOURNEY THROUGH SEXUAL IDENTITY

JAN CLAUSEN

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To Andrea

To Soc

You say I am mysterious.
Let me explain myself:
In a land of oranges
I am faithful to apples.

—ELSAGIDLOW

from *Makings For Meditation*

*Seeing someone holding my fan, the courtier Michinaga
asked whose it was; when he heard it was mine, he took
it and wrote on it the words “Fan of a Floating Woman.”
My response:*

Some cross the Pass of Love,
some don't.
Unless you are the watchman there
it is not your right
to cast blame.

—IZUMI SHIKIBU, HEIAN COURT JAPAN

from *The Ink Dark Moon*,
translated by Jane Hirshfield
with Mariko Aratani

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Preface to the 2017 Edition

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT desire and its consequences: personal and social. It's about the perplexities of identities and the politics they support. It's about the fervent pursuit of justice for all, complicated by the pull of private happiness. It's about a bunch of stubborn people who keep harping on the question, "How should we live?" and rejecting easy answers. It's about the rewards and pitfalls of building the trail while hiking it. It's about proudly claiming the revolutionary high ground, then learning that the boldest, bravest strategies for fixing the world have a downside. I propose that the joys of living out of sync with the lazy common sense of the culture at large are worth the risks of inevitable disappointments, not to mention battle scars. I track a particular kind of gender rebellion, one cast in terms defined by a late 20th century feminism crucial to the forging of our modern understanding that freedom and equality are inextricably bound *both* with matters of state and public policy *and* with the most intimate coordinates of human experience: our bodies, erotic leanings, communities, families.

Begun in 1996 and published in 1999, *Apples & Oranges* looks back on events leading up to a pivotal moment in my life: the decision to leave not only my long-term relationship with a woman, but my identification as a lesbian—and, in consequence, the social networks I'd relied on for my writing and activism. That watershed had occurred in the late 1980s, but despite the changes wrought by the time lag, I started the book at a point when the world around me was still recognizably that of my early adulthood. This was a world in which lesbians and gay men lived outside the law, both in literal terms and in how we were broadly imagined. Despite significant progress since the 1960s in reducing social stigma and breaking down the tyranny of the closet, our intimate relationships were routinely attacked by legal and religious authorities. Same-sex family ties lacked protection under the law. *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the notoriously homophobic Supreme Court decision that upheld a Georgia statute criminalizing sodomy, was years away from being overturned. Marriage equality seemed like a pipe dream, one that many proud supporters of gay and queer liberation deemed far less important than other pressing issues. The policy known as "don't ask, don't tell" made hiding their identities an official requirement for homosexuals serving in the military. Same-sex couples were mostly unable to adopt kids or become foster parents; those who raised one partner's biological offspring had to resign themselves to the co-parent's lack of officially recognized parental rights. In the mid-1990s, the development of effective drugs to fight HIV infection was still a recent, seemingly miraculous event for communities devastated by the siege of AIDS

—and enraged at the widespread stigma and government inaction that fueled the epidemic. While the Internet was emerging as a mass communication tool and information source, it had yet to register its mighty twenty-first century impact on everything from our images of marginalized identities to the strategies for survival and mutual support available to LGBTQ youth to the organizing methods used by radical social movements. Print culture still reigned.

This was a world in which gender seemed considerably more stable, less subject to scrutiny, than it seems to us now—not for everyone, of course, but for the large majority, including plenty of lesbians, gays, and self-described queers whose ways of moving through the world defied straight society’s rigid gender norms.

Today, the mainstream presumption of a heterosexual planet is fading, if far from vanquished, with lesbian, gay, and bisexual lives and identities accorded far more respect and legal protection than they had when I wrote this book. At the same time, a growing movement for transgender rights is rapidly raising consciousness and hammering at entrenched legal barriers. In this climate, people who reject the crude either/or of traditional gender classification, bravely asserting the integrity and dignity of their internal sense of differently gendered being, stand out as the trailblazers of new ways of imagining the sex/gender system. Which is not to say, of course, that many transgender people aren’t comfortable with some version of a binary gender landscape, where “male” and “female” function as ideal types, largely defined in contrast to each other. Yet today, it’s the gender resisters and gender revisers, the gender uprooters and gender refusers, who vividly stake their claim to the radical ramparts—poised to disrupt a schema of polar opposites that has passed its sell-by date.

Depending on how you read it, this book has nothing or everything to do with current struggles over re-imagining how we understand gender. *Nothing*, in the sense that the approach to gender embraced by my generation of feminists, who proudly waved the banner of Woman in the effort to radically expand our own and the public’s sense of what that gender label could signify, can be viewed as reinforcing this rigidly binary system. *Everything*, in that our brand of gender insurrection helped pave the way for the current rebellion against not only the coercion of society’s gender labeling process (with people broadly expected to live out their destinies based on the sex assigned them at birth), but against the tyranny of the whole binary setup. It’s like yanking on the thread that unravels the tapestry: once you start asking questions about the sex/gender system, the frailty of the entire apparatus quickly becomes apparent.

In the main, my generation of feminists subscribed to what can be seen as a kind of gender nationalism, convinced that the solution to the despised and exploited status of females the world over lay in championing our kind, shoring up our affinity group — even as many of us also acknowledged and tried to work with the truth that our many differences, especially those of race and class, often made for gaping disparities in our daily lives, in our access to even the tiniest bits of political leverage, and in our visions for how to achieve positive transformation. Our efforts had an enormous impact, improving the status of women generally, and doing much to diminish lesbians’ marginalization. We rallied around the path-breaking courage of women who dared to flaunt a female masculinity that we called *butch* and the straight world mocked as unfeminine or mannish. On occasion, though, some of us lapsed into a

loopy essentialism (as in claims that women are inherently nurturing, peaceable, and life-oriented while “men love death”). Members of our movement sometimes excluded trans women and male children, falsely reasoning that since “womyn-born wimmin” had long been trampled by patriarchy, we needed to circle the wagons around our biological birthright. Even those who didn’t go there—I certainly among them—mostly ignored the possibility that the experiences of trans people, and even the wide variations in gender expression observable all around us, might necessitate rethinking the notion of Woman as a stable identity, firmly distinguished from Man, rooted in biology as supplemented by a universal socialization process.

When I shared the news that this book would be reissued, and mentioned how strange it felt to revisit the text after so many years, several acquaintances casually asked me if I planned to revise it. My answer was an immediate, horrified *no*, given my awareness that the thing about looking back is that the view keeps changing. Revising (unless the revision is so extensive that the text becomes, in effect, a different work), risks mere cosmetic “updating.” On the other hand, a commitment to thoughtful scrutiny of the products of times past not only helps us refine our grasp of what went on “back in the day,” but encourages that lively, multi-layered process whereby history can seem to return our gaze, affording fresh insights into contemporary struggles. My text is a unified expression of the person I was at the moment of composition and the ways I reflected the times in which I was living. Its errors may be as instructive as its insights. Its testament to my feminist generation’s framing of gender equality questions exclusively around the notion of “women’s liberation” illustrates the truth that important social movements, notwithstanding their great achievements, are time-bound and imperfect.

Yet incomplete as our vision of gender justice was, the majority of its tenets retain their relevance. The more things change, the deeper cruel old power digs in, morphing but ever-hardy. Even as new generations have been busy re-imagining the connections among gender, desire, justice, and freedom, an oppressive system mobilizes and polices gender and desire as these intersect with other key vectors of power and difference (think race, class, disability, nationality, religion . . .). Crucially, we face not only noxious ideas, hateful acts, and malign policies, but entrenched structural conditions that relentlessly reproduce the devaluation of cis women, trans women, trans men, gender queer people, and even cis men who can’t or won’t fall in line with the patriarchal program. In case anyone needs proof that what I refer to in this book as “the problem of being a woman” still hangs heavy over the land, there’s this: I write at a moment when a U.S. presidential election has just provided the stage for an atavistic gender theater, a spectacular object lesson in how far we *haven’t* come. In the aftermath, we have a Republican president-elect who throughout his campaign gleefully flaunted what amounted to a caricature of white heterosexual masculinity imagined as the embodiment of national “greatness.” Meanwhile, supporters of his Democratic opponent routinely advanced the essentialist notion that there would be something inherently positive and forward-looking in the gesture of “breaking the glass ceiling” to install a female “Commander-in-Chief” (aka celebrating a “vagina . . . sitting on the chair in the Oval Office,” as a prominent lesbian writer from my own generation archly phrased her endorsement). Evidently the most basic

questions of 20th-century-style, woman-championing feminism are still very much in play, questions like: is it okay for powerful people with penises to treat people without them as their sex toys? And: is the possession of a vagina by someone who wields vast power inherently humanizing—quite apart from the structures and interests she serves?

So it's partly on account of the ugly tenacity of age-old gender hierarchies—their insidious resilience, even as they morph under the seismic pressures of new social forms—that my tale of 20th-century life as a lesbian feminist still resonates. But in truth, today I'm less interested in the parts of this book that tackle gender theory or spell out a message. Maybe that's because the older I get, the less impressed I am by exposition and exhortation, which ring particularly hollow when the questions really matter. I value most those passages that strike me as successful in suggesting the pungent flavor of an era whose causes and controversies—so urgent *back then*, so peculiar to *that time*—are, beyond their specific contours, emblematic of a powerful, rarely described experience: the strenuous, glorious, tedious, sometimes heartbreaking push and pull of being-with-others in the struggle to repair what is broken by the violence of injustice.

Today, other modes, other imagined communities. New lines of alliance, new bones of contention. The gender revisers, the gender improvisers, the gender interrogators have amped up the pressure on the sex/gender system. Their canniest and bravest interventions so often take on the ways gender is braided with and used to prop up the other interlocking forces of oppression—economic, racial, colonial, and more—that undermine our one indispensable hope: the hope that our faltering species can manage to stick around long enough to make a few basic improvements in our treatment of each other and the planet.

In the documentary “What Happened, Miss Simone?,” a soaring, sobering portrait of a brilliant artist accompanied by her demons, there's a clip in which an interviewer asks, “What's ‘free’ to you, Nina?” The peerless singer answers, “I've had a couple of times onstage when I really felt free, and that's something else. That's really something else! . . . I'll tell you what freedom is to me, no fear. I mean, really, no fear. If I could have that half of my life, no fear.”

If we could have that.

No fear.

If we could *all* have that.

No fear.

—January 2017

Author's Note

PHILOSOPHERS HAVE DEBATED whether—and if so, in what sense—reality exists apart from our perception of it. The author makes no guarantee of the verisimilitude with which she has rendered “actual persons,” whatever those may be. Her purpose in composing this work has been to imagine her own past, the improvisations of a “self that is not one,” with all possible fidelity and rigor. Of necessity, other figures come into her story. She has tried to respect their separateness, their ultimate opacity, and the fact that when they entered her life as relatives, friends, enemies, or lovers, they had no warning that she would one day write about them.

A theme of this book is the need to honor surprise and discontinuity—“resistance to identity”—more than is customary. Even if you suppose that the *dramatis personae* have been more or less faithfully transplanted from some moments of *real life*, please bear in mind that all of them (the author included) are different people now. They have slipped the traces, like the ghostly boy in Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*:

For, long ago, the truth to say,
He has grown up and gone away,
And it is but a child of air
That lingers in the garden there.

Realizing that these cautions will be almost universally disregarded, the author has provided the principal players with fig leaves in the form of invented names. Biographical details have also been altered as necessary to protect privacy.

Introduction

IN JULY 1987, in a war zone in northern Nicaragua, after a dozen years of intense coupledness with my lover Leslie Kaplow and slightly more than that of intensive lesbian feminist activism on literary and political fronts, I got involved with a man.

“I got involved.” How pale and nervous the words ring, like a gauzy cloak obscuring facts that ought to be more frankly stated. “Got involved,” “fell in love,” “became attracted to”—euphemisms all. But what are the facts? Some would say (have said) *she left a woman for a man*. Some would say *betrayed her people*.

At the time, I was thirty-seven years old. Since age twenty-five I had been firmly attached to Leslie, and to her daughter, Emma, who was now a high school senior. Both my extensive political commitments and my growing reputation as a poet and novelist were completely bound up with my lesbian identity. Any sex outside my “marriage” would have meant trouble, but lying naked with a male stranger in our family’s Brooklyn apartment while Les was at a New Jewish Agenda conference in L.A. was like deliberately embarking on a sea cruise off the edge of a flat Earth.

The upheaval that voyage occasioned has been incalculably more traumatic than my original coming out. More than a decade later, I continue to reckon with its consequences on a daily basis. I am still intimately involved with lesbian and gay worlds, their books and politics, their theoretical debates. I continue to write on subjects relevant to those worlds, to perceive my social surroundings in ways that owe much to my erotic and emotional bonds with women. Yet my settled, monogamous partner is a man, and my disinclination to be silent or apologetic about that fact has caused intense controversy, among lesbians especially.

I am someone who has staked a great deal on the proposition that sexuality is central to identity. But my own identity, viewed in conventional terms, now appears as little more than a bizarre succession of contradictory personas: the rebellious adolescent female, acting out through a series of unhappy liaisons with troubled or exploitative young men; the bravely iconoclastic feminist dyke, forging a world with other woman-identified women; the “hasbian,” rerouting her passion to follow the path of least social resistance. Or, if you prefer, the “really heterosexual” woman who works her way through the obfuscations of feminist politics to discover that her true erotic nature cannot be subordinated to ideology.

In my private view of things, I have refused these alternatives, have resisted construing my current relationship as either more or less authentic than the one I had with Leslie. Yet I’ve been obliged to concede that my life appears more fragmented than most. In the U.S. today—indeed, throughout the West in general—heterosexual

and homosexual attractions are commonly understood to be radically distinct dispositions, a circumstance that places anyone who acknowledges desire for both women and men at a loss for a plausible explanation of some of the deepest parts of self. The world can understand adultery, divorce, nonmonogamy, sleeping around, falling out of love or lust—but infidelity to a gender remains a real scandal.

In my own case, a sense of unease at my inability to furnish a credible (never mind seamless) account of my past is heightened by the fact that the writing I published in my twenties and thirties was part of a lesbian feminist effort to invest with decisive political importance the great divide between women who love women and women who love men. I viewed lesbians as a guerrilla insurgency against the gender status quo, so much happier in our beleaguered camaraderie than the huddled masses of concubines and housewives who hugged the safer side of the erotic either/or.

The promise of our movement, in which real sex became the central metaphor for our hope of all that women could be to one another, was that of any revolution: all would be made new, the past would never return. And, indeed, the fond conviction that we were modern Amazons made possible achievements (individual and collective, political and artistic) that I remain intensely proud of. But because the new is the daughter of the old, all revolutionaries who live long enough encounter a season of reckoning. For me that reckoning began in painful earnest when I undid the metaphor by dallying with what a student of mine calls “a person with a penis.”

I had to ask myself some difficult questions, not only about my current choices, but about how I’d been telling the story of my life. My habit of stowing my early, pre-lesbian years in the sub-basement of my autobiography began to seem suspicious. My initial impulse, as far as my new involvement was concerned, was to insist that I hadn’t really contradicted myself—that I still loved women, had the same politics, in some crucial sense remained the person I was before. But could I simply append this latest chapter to the truncated account of a lesbian Jan Clausen that I’d elaborated over the last dozen-plus years? Wouldn’t I need to relate it to the existence of early boyfriends (which, without denying the facts of the case, I’d long considered simply irrelevant)—and, even further back, to the childhood that prepared me not only to be good at meeting gender expectations, but to despise myself for it?

I did not particularly want to remember where I’d come from, to recall the humiliation I associated with conventional femininity, or to revisit the frank contempt in which I’d once held woman-kind. But now the pain I was experiencing as what had seemed a solid identity unraveled, leaving a vertiginous absence of plausible narrative structure, made the project of reviewing all my sexual twists and turns far more urgent than it had been before my fall from lesbian grace. Surely it couldn’t put me through any more mental anguish than what I’d felt weeping in a shabby hotel room where my new male lover and I had spent an ardent weekend, as I bitterly confessed, “I *hate* the institution of heterosexuality—and I’m in love with you.”

It is, then, precisely because my own experience has been so dramatic and difficult that I’ve composed this memoir as a way to understand the fragments in relation to one another. In some sense it’s an effort at mending a broken identity. At the same time, I believe my seeming inconsistencies have something crucial to reveal about the limits of our current sexual categories. Although I recognize that most people are less dissatisfied than I with an either/or approach to eros (even when they are properly

enraged by the unfair advantages it currently affords to heterosexuals), I do not think that justifies forcing everyone to choose between column A and column B. Nor do I believe that wide acceptance of the labels “gay” and “straight” signifies that mixed experiences like mine are particularly uncommon. Rather, I’m convinced that many people who identify as homosexual or heterosexual in fact experience some attraction to both women and men.

As someone who’s excited by others’ excitement, I’d like to propose that sexually aroused women are to sexually aroused men as apples are to oranges. From one point of view, they’re dissimilar enough to make comparison seem foolish. From another, both are delectable fruits, having far more in common than do, for instance, an apple and a handgun, or an orange and a lunar eclipse.

Perhaps my difficulty in furnishing a coherent account of my sexual past should be read as an index of the radical confusion endemic to a society obsessed with sexual sorting, and with the conviction that the bodies and minds of men and women are not merely different but diametrically opposed. For on what other grounds would attraction to one logically preclude attraction to the other?

To put it another way, I think we need to ask: What, after all, is gender? What is sexual desire? In mainstream media and popular culture in general, the former is often equated with anatomical difference plus some mental disposition assumed to accompany it; the latter emerges as the subjective aspect of an “instinct,” “imperative,” or “drive,” supposedly related in some clear and simple fashion to the need to reproduce the species. In contrast, my experience in queer and feminist circles, where ideas about gender and desire are constantly debated, parodied, and bent out of shape in every medium from casual jokes to doctoral dissertations, has taught me never to take either term for granted.

This perspective is sharply at odds with a biological determinism that seeks to explain sexual orientation as a function of some physical attribute: a tiny cell group in the brain, or a gene on the X chromosome. Champions of such explanations rarely bother to delve beneath the surface of commonsense notions about what is involved in being attracted by “men” or by “women.” They do not inquire, for instance, whether what we call sexual attraction is in fact a single, easily defined experience, the same for everyone in all times and places. Nor do they puzzle out the implications of the fact that the attributes thought proper to each gender vary enormously from culture to culture, a circumstance that casts grave doubt on the proposition that a biological factor could orient people to some universal essence of man- or womanhood.

I side with those who use the term *gender* to indicate the social significance that groups of people attach to the physiological differences between males and females, and who view human sexuality as a function of meaning no less than of biology. In this view, gender is always culturally specific, involving complex alignments of beliefs and practices that are capable of nearly endless modification (including as a logical though not a likely possibility the complete disappearance of social distinctions relating to people’s reproductive equipment). Bodily processes create the preconditions for pleasure, but by themselves explain almost nothing. Sexual behavior is to be understood in light of the participants’ fantasies and feelings, which are never simply private but bear a relationship to culturally shared notions of what is desirable, dirty, normal, perverse, butch, virginal, virile, truly feminine, and so on.

The great question, then, is why certain sets of meanings (expressed at times in the leaning toward one gender or the other, but also in the preference for any specific erotic stimulus: voluptuous or anorexic bodies, huge dicks or tiny feet, Chantilly lace and a ponytail, or leather and nipple rings) come alive for particular people, while others do not. Why am I turned on by both men and women? Why, in either, do I so fancy a certain bruised stoicism?

Throughout my life, questions about desire and struggles with its consequences have connected to my sense of my own gender as a problem. The conviction that being a girl doomed me to a second-rate existence emerged very strongly at a point in my teens when I began to identify sexual expression as crucial to who I thought I was. Since then my erotic life has always been enmeshed with shifting feelings about womanhood. It's not that I've ever felt my internal gender sense was out of sync with my physiology (an experience reported by many people, some of whom seek sex-change operations), but that what "feeling like a woman" means to me has evolved over time. My confrontation with what I call "the problem of being a woman" is the common thread connecting my teenage misery, my twentysomething intoxication with a brave new world of lesbians, and my ultimate discovery that I could neither live comfortably in that world nor leave it except as a backward-looking exile deeply nostalgic for its defiant energies and creative companionship.

My evolving thoughts on these issues have been heavily influenced by grassroots gay and lesbian perspectives of the sort that Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, editors of the classic anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, call "theory in the flesh," as well as by "queer theory" emanating from academic settings. This broad body of work has sensitized me to the historical and cultural dimensions of sexuality, suggesting that different eras approach the erotic in vastly different ways; it has shaped my thinking with convincing arguments that one's sense of a sexual self is profoundly inflected by race and socioeconomic class.

Despite its privileged place in our cultural imagination, I do not believe that sexual desire differs greatly from other powerful predilections that often help to mold people's lives: the yearning to raise children, for example, or the drive to develop an artistic talent. Rather than sharing the widespread notion of sexuality as an uncontrollable force that defines a person's nature, I view it as an instance of human self-making, a creative force never fully under conscious control yet one that commonly involves what I can only call choice. Because that is such a loaded word in the context of gay sexuality, I should hasten to add that people often have little say over *which* choices they are able to make.

I did not choose to be capable of sexual feelings for both men and women, any more than others choose more exclusive orientations. I cannot will my own desire to be just anything, any more than I can choose to acquire the capacity to be a great opera singer. But at any given moment I exert a shaping influence; out of possible paths, I take one and not others. And there's a logic to my erotic choices that relates very closely to what's happening in other areas of my life. At the time I "fell for a man," for example, my roles within a lesbian family and a rather ingrown counterculture had come to seem predictable, restrictive; while, as I've written elsewhere, "heterosex ironically represent[ed] for me the anarchic power of the erotic."

That acting out the culturally dominant form of desire could for me come to signify rebellion and defiance was possible only because I belong to a social order that insists even more firmly on erotic allegiance to a single gender than it does on the specific (heterosexual) form of that allegiance. This insistence is so pervasive and successful that it tends to make either/or categories seem both natural and inevitable, obscuring the fact that many groups in many eras and locations have taken ambidextrous sexuality in stride.

When one reviews the historical and cross-cultural evidence, our local obsession with sexual pigeonholing begins to look both quirky and peculiarly compulsive. The great Sappho herself is said to have swung both ways. Mary Wollstonecraft's eclectic passions are more solidly documented (though she, too, has been claimed as a lesbian foremother). As the historian Jonathan Ned Katz points out in *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, Walt Whitman was not only a "man-lover" but a "trailblazer of a publicly silenced, often vilified lust between the sexes." In much of Latin America today, the great divide of male sexuality has to do not with the gender of one's partners but with preference for penetrating or being penetrated; only those who assume the so-called passive position are seen as compromising their masculinity. A similar arrangement prevailed in ancient Greece and Rome. In Suriname, working-class men and women of African descent commonly engage in "*mati* work," involving same-gender sexual relationships that may alternate or coexist with opposite-gender relationships.

Even in the U.S., the either/or model has not gone completely unchallenged. Among its critics are a small but feisty bisexual movement, a number of whose leaders are women who at one time identified as lesbians. While I respect their efforts, which have helped many people cope with societal incomprehension of their eclectic desires and have raised consciousness in gay communities at least to the extent of persuading a number of groups to add "bisexual" to their titles, I do not think that the problems stemming from our habit of classifying people by the gender of their sexual partners will be resolved by adding a third menu option. Nor do I think that "bisexual" is going to be able to compete with gay and straight as an *identity*, that is a designation that confers a badge of membership and constructs plausible links between our personal pasts and futures. In fact, bisexuality is widely understood by gay and straight alike to be another name for sexual confusion, the failure to make the commitment to one gender that is thought to constitute a "real" identity.

The drawbacks of the either/or model are not confined to its inadequacy to describe the experiences of people who actually want to go to bed with both men and women. The model also ignores the significance of subtle forms of arousal that those committed to either/or identities experience in the company of the "wrong" gender without feeling a need to question their sexual selfhood. (I'm thinking, for example, of the homoeroticism that pervades gender-segregated sports and military organizations, powerful precisely because it is a group phenomenon, a connector of those whose official erotic interests are elsewhere; I'm thinking, as well, of the attraction that sometimes flows between gay men and lesbians, and has recently given rise to esoteric debates about whether sex between such pairs should be considered "queer.") Fixation on the issue of whom people actually "do it" with diverts attention from, among other things, the ways in which we all participate in the polymorphous

eroticism of the mass media, which ceaselessly tout the sexual allure of both male and female bodies.

Problematic at every level, the either/or framework presents especially grave problems for anyone trying to understand the range of women's erotic experiences. A number of studies and voluminous anecdotal evidence indicate that contemporary U.S. women in large numbers experience flexible, fluid attractions of the sort recognized by the pioneering sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, who, working in the 1940s and 1950s, considered it unhelpful to label anyone hetero- or homosexual and instead devised the "Kinsey scale," a system for representing an individual's degree of desire for and erotic activity with partners of either gender. The scale runs from zero to six, with six representing someone who reports exclusively same-gender attractions; a three would be about equally drawn to men and to women.

Richard Pillard, a prominent gay psychiatrist who has been researching possible genetic influences on sexuality, expresses the gender comparison in this way:

I think women's sexuality is different [from men's]. Not being a woman I can't talk about this with the same kind of inner assurance that I can about men, but I think women are much more flexible in their sexual orientation—they don't as often label themselves as gay or straight. Usually when you ask that question of men . . . most will say they're gay or straight; they dichotomize. Women often will say, "Well, it depends on whom I'm with, on what sort of relationship I'm having . . ." And they'll often have had relationships that are lesbian and relationships that are heterosexual. They're quite functional and quite involved in both these kinds of relationships. You might want to call more women bisexual, which we [researchers] end up doing, but I think women's orientation is really much more complicated than men's sexual orientation. I think it's really a harder thing to study in the quantitative way that we've been doing.

While I find Pillard's observations useful, I think it's important to note that a history of sexual flexibility by no means automatically ensures, though it may sometimes encourage, women's resistance to identifying as either gay or straight. Given the social and political utility of these powerful identities, not to mention the difficulty of bypassing them in a society where everyone is widely assumed to be one or the other, it is hardly surprising that many attempt to square complex erotic histories with simple, dichotomous labels.

In *The Girls Next Door: Into the Heart of Lesbian America* (1996), the lesbian journalists Pamela Brandt and Lindsay Van Gelder address some of the perplexities attendant on such efforts. In a chapter entitled "Everybody Out of the Gene Pool," they forthrightly acknowledge that many lesbians have experienced some degree of satisfaction in sexual and romantic relationships with men. They cast a skeptical eye on efforts to apply biologically deterministic theories—or, indeed, any rigid either/or grid—to lesbian sexuality: "Our own interviews, a look at what's talked about in lesbian publications and on online bulletin boards, and what academic research exists on the subject all indicate that a great many women in the gay community appear to be Kinsey middles and Kinsey rovers who, for various reasons, label themselves

lesbians . . . if there's a single word that describes much of female sexuality, gay *or* straight, it's 'fluidity.'" And they admit, "The trickiest part is that no one in our community knows precisely what anyone else means when she describes herself as a lesbian, a bisexual, or a heterosexual."

Brandt and Van Gelder speculate on two sets of factors—neither one primarily sexual—that might distinguish those women who are attracted to both men and women but end up identifying as lesbians from those with similarly complex attractions who never come out. Possibly "[i]t's about guts, not pussy." In other words, some women who have a choice are reluctant to give up the privileges associated with the heterosexual label. Or perhaps "Kinsey middles and Kinsey rovers" (that is, women who would rate about a three on the scale and women whose balance of attractions shifts over time) come out because whatever erotic satisfactions they may experience with men fail to compensate for the sorts of flaws (lack of sensitivity to others' feelings, avoidance of housework and child care) that women commonly complain of in male domestic partners.

Given the premise that many women have some degree of choice about whether they gravitate to male or female lovers (which is not, of course, to say that all do), one might reasonably conclude that if mainstream notions of sexuality were based on women's experiences, the dominant model would look more like a Kinsey spectrum than like a pair of rigidly imposed "orientations." Or perhaps—à la ancient Greece or modern Suriname—the gender(s) of a person's sexual partners would seem no more relevant a gauge of his or her basic nature than would a host of other habits, preferences, and tastes.

The fact is, however, that modern Western sexual categories have evolved from scientific theories and sexual folklore that focus overwhelmingly on male behavior and feelings. Women's experiences are typically explained as lesser or even defective versions of men's—an approach that fits in only too well with traditional views of men's sexuality as strong and assertive, that of women (especially "ladies," that is, upper- and middle-class females) as weak and reactive. The commonplace depiction of male desire as an urgent, even uncontrollable event marked by clearly observable physical signs and progress to a swift, decisive climax sets the standard for desire in general; a more lingering, not so genitally localized arousal, an eroticism described as deeply rooted in emotions, may appear *less* sexual rather than differently so. It is hardly surprising, then, that women are asked to lie quietly in the Procrustean bed of either/or identities.

There is a further important sense in which those identities have quite different implications for women than for men. The fact that gender relations are power relations, that even the most privileged female finds herself disadvantaged in relation to certain groups of males, gives women a major incentive to flout the rules of gender.

And homosexuality is popularly imagined to be a violation of gender norms as much as of sexual ones. Thus, lesbianism, with its associations of "mannishness," may seem like revolt against gender subordination—as it certainly did to me. By the same token, heterosexuality may connote conformity and submission.

For men, however, the stakes are different. Like women, gay men have reason to rebel. Many of them have been taunted and ostracized for a perceived failure of masculinity; in particular, transvestites and "effeminate" gays have often

courageously defied gender stereotyping. Yet during the past several decades, white, affluent gay men whose attraction to other men appears to be the only thing standing between them and traditional male privilege have shown little interest in mounting an assault on gender inequality. Instead, they've invested most of their efforts in a necessary but far too narrow campaign to legitimize homosexual desire.

I believe it is in part because prevailing gender arrangements work to their benefit that both straight and gay male sex researchers, men whose theories have received a great deal of media attention and currently exert major influence over popular understandings of sexuality, have frequently neglected to think very deeply about what exactly gender is, how it figures in desire, and how gendered relationships (sexual or not) reflect patterns of power in the society at large. Rather than considering that women's complex attractions might pose a radical challenge to assumptions about the fixity of both gender and sexual categories, many of these men have preferred to regard masculinity and femininity as distinctions etched in the Darwinian stone of an evolutionary outcome. If nearly everyone wants either apples or oranges (if in fact, as "gay gene" theories suggest, some of these desires are encoded in our DNA), then oranges and apples must be different to the core; the distinction lies in what they really are, not merely in meanings we attribute to their surface variations. By closing off the question of how culturally malleable understandings of gender actually relate to biological sex differences, this reductive approach to eroticism unwittingly reinforces sexist assumptions about the natures of men and women.

Despite widespread popular appeal and an enthusiastic acceptance among a large subset of gay men, biologically determinist theories have not, by and large, appealed greatly to women who feel under pressure to explain their own erotic inclinations. While some who felt their queerness early do invoke hard wiring or genetic influence, large numbers of lesbian-identified women prefer to speak in terms of emotional makeup, political or moral commitment, or long-range practice versus mere experimentation. In other words, they are likely to interpret a woman's desire for certain sorts of partners as stemming from who she is. Gay men tend to see it the other way around: a man is who he is because his desire is directed to one or the other gender—desire is destiny. It is precisely because few women share this attitude that lesbians' discussions about "dykes who fall for men" often reach such a bitter pitch.

By highlighting the way in which a societal debate over the relationship between desires and identities has played out in certain groups of lesbians, my own memoir illustrates most directly how our current system of rigid sexual categories shortchanges women. That focus is in keeping with my conviction that criticisms of the either/or model always need to keep gender in mind. It will not do to assume that various kinds of sexual behavior have symmetrical implications for women and for men. This is not to say, however, that I think my story lacks all relevance for efforts to get beyond conventional thinking about men's desires. Women have always been schooled to pay attention to men's stories and men's theories; we have measured ourselves, as my own life attests, by all sorts of masculine yardsticks. Reciprocation is centuries overdue.

In considering my topic's gender implications, I need to acknowledge the extent to which my perceptions of what "women" do and feel reflect the contours of my own

journey. My experience “as a woman” is not timeless or borderless, but very much a function of my particular circumstances. As lesbian and gay historians have established, the very notion of the lesbian as a special type of woman defined by her desire is relatively recent; even more recent and local is the vision of women-loving women as a community or people (a “lesbian nation,” in Jill Johnston’s phrase), a notion that has appealed more to white, middle-class women than to others for whom experiences of race and class exclusion have made vivid the things (especially power) that divide us. My nearly lifelong tendency to regard sexual identity as an appropriate, even inevitable, medium through which to negotiate my gender grievances is a telltale mark of my social origins.

I want to make it clear at the outset that I am *not* claiming that everyone, or even a majority of people, would become “bisexual” with a little encouragement, or that if they did the world would be a better place. And I think it’s fine to be straight or gay by choice. What’s not okay is to lie about the complex attractions that often culminate in simple labels. What’s unacceptable is to bully the border-crossers. What’s got to stop is the rigging of history to make the either/or look permanent and universal.

I understand why this argument may seem dangerous to erotic outsiders for whom the public assertion of a coherent, unchanging lesbian or gay identity has proved an indispensable tactic in the battle against homophobic persecution. The issue bears comparison with distinct but related questions surrounding racial identity: for instance, will a focus on nuances inadequately represented by “black and white” labeling, including a trend toward recognizing biraciality, undermine the solidarity of people of color in the face of ongoing racism? Despite the danger that a blurring of sexual categories could feed into heterosexist and antifeminist backlash, I believe it is high time that lesbians and gays, as well as the straight world, retire their border police. As Audre Lorde put it in the poem “Between Ourselves,” “I do not believe / our wants / have made all our lies / holy.”

Besides, I want to argue for the value (not merely the existence) of those liminal conditions that shadow all would-be solid identities. The improvisers, the borderland people, know secrets that sex-radical movements keep alternately uncovering and suppressing. A genius for subversion—not the urge for certainty—has allowed modern gay and lesbian movements to fashion a space of freedom within a culture of control.

That space has been my school. That’s why I can’t help looking back.

ONE

Apples and Oranges

WHEN I OFFICIALLY declared myself a lesbian at the age of twenty-four, I did not exactly forget about my history of vigorous if problematic involvements with men. Rather, after the fashion of all sorts of people who, in various circumstances, religious and secular, claim symbolic rebirth, I bracketed that old life. I would not deny, but neither would I dwell on, my mostly heterosexual past, which I now defined as a species of error, and a far less significant portion of my biography than my present and future. My transfiguration was far from unique; indeed, I would likely never have had the nerve or need so radically to redefine myself if not for the encouragement of droves of smart, plucky women who were simultaneously embracing the heady task of reinventing our gender in defiance of patriarchal expectations.

At the time, I belonged to a circle of feminist poets who ended up functioning as a coming-out support group. Of seven members, only one was that admirable thing, an old-fashioned, lifelong lesbian. The other six, in our twenties and thirties, were in various stages of emergence into woman-loving. Two had been married, were mothers of young children. To us, the products of an era deeply attentive to the social dimensions of personal arrangements, this turn toward women was politically charged, yet in no way abstract or dryly theoretical. Unlike the infamous “political lesbians,” feminists who would eventually be accused of having committed themselves only “from the neck up,” we were as eager as adolescents who’ve just discovered sex to make love to one another and to the other young dykes who showed up for poetry readings at the new Women’s Coffeehouse or crowded onto the postage-stamp dance floor in the Duchess, an overpriced lesbian bar off Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village.

If my coming out was a community event, so, in a sense, was my relationship with Leslie. She and I met at the New York Women’s School, a new Brooklyn feminist center that occupied the drafty parlor and second floors of a brownstone on seedy Ninth Street in not yet fashionable Park Slope. I enrolled in her women’s literature course; we connected through our crabby reluctance to admire each and every piece of writing with even vaguely feminist content. (Most audaciously, I remember, we argued that Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* was not a very good novel.) We attended women’s cultural events like a reading given by Adrienne Rich and Robin Morgan in the studios of radio station WBAI. (Les got into trouble for crabbiness again, writing a review that acknowledged her preference for Rich’s subtle language over Morgan’s rhetoric. She was right, I thought, but Rich herself objected: *our* criticism mustn’t

reproduce the competitive atmosphere of the male poetry scene.) We courted in her cluttered apartment, our discussions of poetry punctuated by four-year-old Emma's bedtime routines. As we settled into existence as a couple, our social life increasingly revolved around the bicoastal village of feminist publishing.

Coming out as a lesbian, then, was not about isolation; even though one did become a pariah in much of straight society, it mostly felt like belonging. In contrast, getting involved with a man entailed a furtiveness, a sense of being the only one, reminiscent of the closet.

I first encountered Benjamin manning the Reagan Tank, an attention-getting prop belonging to the Brooklyn Nicaragua Sister City Project, a grassroots group formed in 1986 by supporters of the Sandinista revolution. (I'd plunged into Central America solidarity work out of conviction, but also in response to the claustrophobia attendant on my sojourn in women-only spaces; by the early 1980s, I was itching to have an impact on the big bad two-sexed world.) The tank was a large papier-mâché shell in the shape of Ronald Reagan's head, set atop a mock-up of an armored vehicle sprouting a swiveling gun barrel. The whole contraption was mounted on wheels and designed to be maneuvered by someone stationed within. There were eyeholes, but the tank's rigidity didn't allow much breadth of vision, so the helmsman required a helper who could steer clear of obstacles, hand out informational flyers, answer bystanders' questions, and deflect belligerent patriots. At a certain Park Slope street fair, Benjamin took the role of Ron, and I landed the job of leading him around—a strangely intimate pairing, though inimical to small talk.

We had no contact for months afterward, but then we were thrown together on the project's first Nicaragua delegation, a group of about a dozen Brooklynites who traveled south to meet residents of our tiny sister "city," a coffee-growing village called San Juan del Río Coco. The delegation was gone for ten days—a couple of nights each in Managua and Estelí, another in Matagalpa, and a hectic sojourn in the dangerous, war-lush hills above the Coco River, where campesinos lugging AK-47s inquired in their soft, elided Spanish if Brooklyn chickens were bigger than their chickens. Back in the Big Apple, in hallucinatory heat, Benjamin and I "did the do," as he would say.

He was in his mid-forties at the time. Born on the tiny, dry Caribbean island of Carriacou, he'd grown up in a family of subsistence farmers, working the fields, tending cattle and sheep, eating fry bakes and kuku and crab soup, watching year after year the same American westerns—*High Noon* and *Shane*—that would return to the movie house in St. George's, Grenada, where he attended high school. Eventually he aced the Cambridge exam and won a scholarship to university in England. Now, having traveled worlds, he was a lawyer in Brooklyn, a naturalized U.S. citizen who viewed with quiet rage the global machinations of his adopted empire.

We found in each other an unexpected likeness.

In falling in love with him, I was rushing headlong, and yet it was deliberate. I was a walking oxymoron. I was compulsively attracted, I willed myself to be. I was hastening to be out of control before I changed my mind. "I couldn't help myself" feels almost accurate—except for its evasion of responsibility, which won't do at all. What I was up to took me by surprise, yet in retrospect has a fated air about it.

The first hint of what was in store came when the delegation arrived in San Juan. We were weary, grubby, giddy with relief at having reached our destination in one piece. (The army had supervised our trip over the unpaved road from Estelí, as it wouldn't do to have foreign visitors wiped out in a contra ambush.) It happened to be the "Day of the Teacher," and that night we were asked to attend a celebratory dance held in the town's only school. The music was canned, people showed up in work clothes, and I was oddly reminded of a junior high school sock hop. I grumbled, not too loudly, about the heterosexist scene, certain callow youths being too visibly delighted by the novelty of dancing with a gringa. What if I'd rather dance with girls? I said.

"So I am warned," Benjamin humbly remarked. "I know better than to ask you." We'd hung out some already, back in Managua. On a trip like that you get to know people pretty fast. I said, No, no, of course I didn't mean *him*. The next dance turned out to be a slow one. We're precisely the same height; our bodies fitted perfectly. Something gently ironic in his way of holding me, a rueful delicacy of touch, moved me in a way I couldn't have anticipated. Later I thought of that embrace for comfort, as I lay awake in the bedroom I shared with another Brooklyn woman, the Sandinista grandmother who was putting us up, and two or three of her small granddaughters. I laughed at the sheer incongruity of life, but thought I might as well enjoy it.

I spent the next few days being friendly and high-minded, even after Benjamin declared his interest. On the last night in Managua, the Fourth of July, we fell into each other's arms in Sandino Airport, across the road from our hotel, where we'd gone to escape our companions' scrutiny. I was having to think of everything at once, and I recall being glad that we were in a country where the fact of our two so very different colors was almost neutralized by all we had in common—the English language, our middle-class shoes and watches, our being so obviously from the overprivileged North. According to Benjamin, we "hadn't done anything" because we hadn't gone to bed; but I was a lesbian, and used to rating sex more by the heat it generated than by the standard checklist of maneuvers that culminates in going all the way. By my criteria, we went far indeed, making out fully clothed in the tropical dark of the courtyard adjoining the airline terminal.

Back in Brooklyn, we met for dinner at a trendy restaurant, the white dyke writer and the straight Black legal aid attorney nibbling goat cheese and sun-dried tomatoes, for all the world like a yuppie couple on a date. Conversation at first was stilted, and I winced at Benjamin's comment that perhaps what we'd experienced in Nicaragua had been the equivalent of a shipboard romance, best forgotten once the boat is back in port. We loosened up as the meal progressed, however, and I invited him to walk back with me to my shabby Eleventh Street apartment, much neater than usual with Leslie out of town and Emma off for six weeks at sleep-away camp. Sitting primly on the massive blue couch that Leslie had inherited from her marriage, its upholstery much the worse for the fact that the cats insisted on using it for a scratching post, we agreed that our situation was difficult indeed. Then I moved closer, took his hand, and that was that. In a way, it felt like high school all over again, how fast he managed to get my bra unhooked, how I was the one to have to think of consequences.

We had two nights together, and they did make me happy, despite my premonitions of disaster. I need to be touched by a desiring someone, to hold and be held.

Passionate intimacy—which I tend to equate with love—is, in my book, the best thing about being a grown-up, the closest we ever get to adequate compensation for a loneliness it’s useless to bemoan, given that it comes with being conscious and having to die eventually.

Somehow, passion had gone wrong between Leslie and me. When we were first together, we’d made love a lot. I reveled in her capacity for pleasure, which conformed better than mine to the newly expert-sanctioned norm of female insatiability. But after several years, sex became a problem.

I blamed her, and cited her frequent rejections of my overtures. But though her skittishness was real, so was my own ambivalence. It was nowhere near as simple as that I wanted and she didn’t; increasingly, we wanted different things. She wanted to feel “safe” to have sex, and to me that meant a cloying sentimentality, a denial of aggression. I wasn’t interested in the sex you have to work at—dutiful, mature. I wanted the sort you work so hard to resist, keeping your legs crossed, hands folded in your lap, while your mucous tissues swell, heat blossoms in your gut, and a touch might send you rolling on the ground, an ecstatic animal. I craved a love affair. Now, in true fairy-tale fashion, I was punished with wish fulfillment.

On the day after that second night with Benjamin, I drove to Kennedy Airport to meet Les’s plane. I remember vividly—and hope I never taste again—the peculiar dread that flavored that journey, an aura of doom only slightly relieved by the merciful illusion of distance from the future that comes to one’s aid at such times. I suppose I also felt an undercurrent of excitement—change was about to happen, and I would be its author—but mostly I wanted to not be who I was, going where I was going.

Les came toward me through the glass doors, distinguished in the stream of anonymous passengers by her shambling, slightly bowlegged gait and the brusque expression, almost a scowl, that kept at bay a world she basically mistrusted. Me she did trust, alas, and I got a strong, soft hug. (Of the two of us, she had the more womanly breasts, in lovely counterpoint to her basically butch demeanor.)

I told her in the car, somewhere on the Belt Parkway, that I’d slept with Benjamin and didn’t know where that left us. I could see no way around an immediate declaration; brutal honesty was part of our pact. Her response was, as I’d expected, incredulity and outrage.

Les had always been a woman of firm principles, among the fiercest a concept of personal loyalty that brooked no deviation. Included in that concept was an ideal of sexual fidelity that, while not absolute (after much unhappiness she had acknowledged *in theory* that our relationship might be able to withstand my involvement with another woman), certainly ruled out my sleeping with a man. This proviso seemed so obvious that we had never discussed it, any more than we would have thought to specify that one of us shouldn’t open the other’s mail or strike the other in anger.

Accordingly, she read my action as betrayal. She focused her outrage where it would remain, on what we called “the man question”—often, indeed, on details that seemed insignificant to me. I’d defiled *our* apartment by taking Benjamin there; he and I had made love on *two* separate occasions. (“You must have enjoyed it,” she said scathingly, as though that clinched the case against me, “since you went back a

second time.”) With more justice, she berated me for having had unprotected sex; uneasy, I tried to argue that it hadn’t been so unsafe, given that my partner had minimal risk factors. She treated what I’d done as a terrible disgrace—somehow a reflection on her—that we’d have to hide from our community at large.

I thought then—I think now—that my unforgivable choice was simply to forsake our long intimacy, the deep monogamy of it, for connection with another. She insisted that gender was the heart of the matter, telling me that if I’d slept with a woman, she’d have felt betrayed as my lover, but that because I’d slept with Benjamin, she felt betrayed as a lesbian. “Because of you,” she said, “I can’t think positively about the word *fuck* anymore.” That was shorthand, I knew, for the unanswerable accusation that I’d sold our lesbian secrets to the Man.

As I recall these scenes now, Leslie seems like an enemy, someone brimming with hate and vengeance. That is the face she’d have me remember; yet I also recall that our war of attrition (which dragged on dreadfully into a lethal fall, while I adhered to the letter if not the spirit of her dictum against having sex with Benjamin) was rendered doubly agonizing because we each remained for the other the one in whom it seemed only natural to confide. To the end, we’d sift each particle of feeling in a dense mesh of talk. Our relationship was a tour de force of process.

Maybe I could have gotten off the hook if she’d been bad to me in the past, if I could have said she didn’t love me or wasn’t my closest friend, if the aloofness that contributed to my restlessness in the first place had signaled real indifference instead of prolonged depression. The truth was, I’d initially been attracted by her pain. She was a smart, unhappy woman, and I’d hoped to comfort her, to be worthy of that tough, proud, stubborn helplessness. I had meant to *care for her* in both senses of the phrase, and in doing so to care for myself. In my arrogance, I’d wormed my way into her heart. So how could I now complain about needing elbow room?

Besides, I knew how badly I would miss the companionship of the critical bent we shared, the excitement of her insights into politics and writing. We had made a world together, raised a child, founded a magazine, been each other’s editors. She knew me, as she told me, better than anyone. (But *whom* did she know? That was a looming question; it appeared that I could only become the person she thought I was already. “*My lover* doesn’t sleep with a man,” she said, making me furious.)

When I left, I left cleanly, though not soon enough. I had tarried mostly out of cowardice. I kept hoping something would happen to release me from admitting the unpardonable fact that I wanted my own life, separate from hers. I remember, after months of indecision, picking up a women’s magazine I found lying around and glancing at an article on divorce. *I could just go!* I thought. *Straight people do it every day!* And the world opened up.

I suppose that most divorces are experienced as symbolic, the singular misfortune of two individuals blurring into intimations of universal disappointment. For Leslie and me, as for other lesbian couples who shared our brand of feminism, this effect was hugely amplified by the political expectations with which our relationship had been freighted. Our union was never just about us, but about women together defying patriarchy. Like the poet Elsa Gidlow, we lived in orange country, but had opted for fidelity to apples. So our failure seemed tantamount to letting down the side.

Les, of course, might hope to find a better apple. But my own case was rendered exceedingly problematic by the way in which my very womanness had become entwined with lesbian politics. My involvement with a man reacquainted me with a species of self-hatred that I'd expected to put behind me once and for all by coming out. I'd revised my estimation of what it meant to be a woman by making love with women—not by virtue of any quality intrinsic to particular sorts of bodies but because of how I interpreted that act as honoring female strength and beauty. In a world where masculinity equals power, where heterosex is pushed on every corner, and where my own early experiences with men had been drenched in the bitterness of my second-class gender status, how could I now explain my interest in Benjamin as anything other than backsliding?

The intense self-doubt I felt upon leaving Leslie received massive reinforcement from public opinion. There's a poem by Judy Grahn that sticks in my mind, one of the Common Woman Poems, made famous via the underground press and the poster versions that used to paper the walls of women's centers and bookstores. The one about the common woman rising like bread was the most famous. But the one I'm thinking of now begins, "She has taken a woman lover / whatever shall we do."

"She has taken a *man* lover, whatever shall we do." Ordinary enough, though lamented, for a publicly known lesbian couple to split messily, with third-party involvement. As a matter of fact, Audre Lorde, by this time not only a renowned lesbian poet but a beloved community hero, had recently left the lover with whom she'd raised her children and taken up residence with a new female companion. The loss of an icon of long-term couplehood was regretted by some but treated as a basically private matter. Similar things had happened with less famous pairs. My case was otherwise: I would be exiled from the Garden of Dykedom. I'd also be dropped from the unofficial roster of "approved" lesbian writers, a harsh blow given that my volumes of poems, a short story collection, and my two recent novels were all centered on lesbian themes. Branded with a scarlet "H" for "het," I'd henceforth be denounced as a lapsed woman lover, pitied as a tragic mulatto of sex.

Disoriented by my separation from Leslie, unsure whether Benjamin and I had a future together, I nevertheless kept having to come out in reverse. There was always one more person who hadn't heard the news. Innocent assumptions put me in a quandary; requests for my lesbian signature on a petition, my lesbian contribution to a gay anthology, required awkward caveats and disclaimers.

I had helped make all these rules, so I couldn't be too surprised when an artist friend told me she just hoped I wouldn't start putting down lesbians and gays, because she knew someone else who'd done that after sleeping with a guy. Far-off gossip made a beeline for my burning ears. "Of course she wasn't invited to the party. You don't know? She's gone straight."

In time the uproar faded, though the echo of scandal lingers. I still wonder when I run into certain old acquaintances—or am introduced to dykes I've never met but who I know will know *about* me—just what they think of me. What hasn't faded is people's curiosity. Both gay and straight consider it rather weird that I inhabit the social space of "former lesbian." It's a little (just a little) like being a transgendered person, or maybe one of those super-scrutinized mothers on welfare: someone on whom the burden of explanation falls disproportionately. I think people want to know

which version of me is real. And how to locate other leopards who might be prone to change their spots. When all's said and done, they are sexually curious, though they hardly have the nerve to come right out and ask, "So what's it like to move from Vaginaland to Penisville?"

What most do not imagine is that the biggest shock has little to do with sex. My experience has made me acutely aware of the ways in which, in a modern urban setting, erotic inclinations intertwine with culture, a word I am using here in the anthropological sense. What one "is" sexually in a place like New York may largely determine one's friendship networks, the novels one reads, one's spiritual community, the ocean beaches one frequents, the demonstrations one attends, the way one's hair is cut, the jokes one finds amusing. My post-lesbian life straddles two minimally intersecting universes. The fact that I can pass quite comfortably in either doesn't do a thing to kill the pain of loss.

All of us, once past a certain age, have pieces of ourselves that have gotten detached, that float around in the world and can confront us unawares—reminders of bungled friendships, strained family ties, love that ended in a cul-de-sac. Like so many breakups, my rupture with Les created a host of such fragments. Though I'm by no means finished with the consequences, at least I've begun to reckon with a level of emotional chaos that, in a culture of divorce, passes for a sort of structure. My guilt and sorrow can be accounted for, are mirrored in other people's messed-up lives. A language exists in which to talk about them.

But there's another unhealed wound, the ache of lost identity, that has taken me much longer to begin to come to terms with. Often enough, I've tried simply to ignore it, the better to affect a show of brave insouciance when confronted by the guardians of dyke morality. Besides, it's in my character to fear that interrupting the grim slog of life to dwell on pains and difficulties not only isn't going to mend matters, but will probably make them worse. "You seem like a tough cookie," commented one reader of an early draft of these pages. What she didn't grasp—what I shrank from admitting—was that when my sexual history comes under scrutiny, I'm never far from panic. It's the sense of being on trial for my identity that floods me with this moral vertigo, leaves me inwardly defenseless against others' opinions, even as I hum another chorus of "*Je ne regrette rien.*"

Like many an ex-believer, I retain many elements of the worldview that crystallized around my vanished faith. I sometimes act as though I still believe that women loving women are a superior breed. Being queer meant so many things to me that were not about sex exactly, though they were connected to it. Besides investing woman's mediocre estate with unprecedented promise, the lesbian label served me as a powerful metaphor for my lifelong sense of outsiderhood—and got me in the door of the best club I ever joined. Les and I used to joke about being card-carrying dykes. Now that my card's been revoked, I can better appreciate how a band of brilliant outlaws satisfied my paradoxical cravings for belonging and resistance.

The paradox was underlined for me when Emma came out at the age of twenty. After a lengthy era in which Leslie and I were the dykes, allied against the putatively heterosexual values of a teenager embarrassed to have deviants for parents, we entered a phase where the two of them are paired and I'm odd woman out. They're roommates in the funky lavender mansion that flies the rainbow flag, while I hang out

on the porch, staring through the picture window.

When I was a lesbian, my habits of thought seemed authorized by my identity; my reactions and opinions were lesbian reactions and opinions, at least as good as anybody else's. Now I monitor myself, guarding against reversion to straight-mindedness. This scrutiny extends to the tiniest gestures, the most trivial remarks: I mention "a couple" and a lesbian friend corrects me: "A *heterosexual* couple." Or I slip and refer to RuPaul as "he." (When I was a lesbian, the reference might have come across as a feminist position on gender; now it only sounds retrograde.) I know I'm more grateful than I ought to be at the faintest signs of impending rehabilitation: an invitation by a prominent gay historian to contribute a volume to a gay and lesbian series for young adults (it's the first time in years that anybody queer has asked me to contribute anything to anything); acceptance by the queer faculty in a writing program where I teach. Appallingly, I'm secretly overjoyed to be dyke-baited on the street (it happens rarely, but it happens). I'm thrilled when students assume I'm a lesbian.

In public places, I watch lesbians, not as Les and I used to do, playing the time-honored game of dyke-spotting, but with a queasy mixed feeling of kinship and estrangement that intensifies radically when I'm with Benjamin. A few months ago we were in a restaurant with my parents, and I found myself seated facing a table for two, its occupants white women, thirtyish, each a marvel of dyke chic, one butchly tailored and wearing a tie, the other also suited but with subtly femmier accents, both with impeccably sculpted hair (a shaved nape, an artful lock in front) and wearing pinky rings. They dawdled over their coffee and biscotti, seemingly oblivious to the world at large yet so studied in their handling of visual effects, their conspicuous consumption of the meal and of each other, that it was hard to think they weren't intent on being noticed. As they stood up to leave, they kissed ceremoniously. If I'd been with Les, we'd have laughed at their preening: "Who was that, Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge? I thought I was going to have a class attack." Now I felt simply dated, frumpy, because I was with a man. My fantasies running wild, I imagined them watching *me*, inwardly mocking straight social rituals, comparing their sexy freedom to the banality of our dull hetero foursome. In that moment, I projected onto two hapless diners all the smugness of identity I myself used to cultivate, all the self-righteous scorn aimed at me when I defected.

I monitor my dreams and sexual fantasies, hoping to reassure myself that I haven't really "gone straight." What does it mean that in life I still find women so attractive (viewed as possible bed partners, most men continue to strike me as faintly ridiculous if not downright repulsive) but favor heterosexual scenarios for masturbation fantasies? Erotic dreams about women don't prove a thing, not as long as I'm with a man and liking it.

A colleague (lesbian) reads a portion of this memoir: "But your early life just sounds pretty heterosexual. I don't understand how you got to be this public dyke." Immediately, I crumple, unable to hear that her comments are about the writing, about a need for more depth and detail. It seems to me she's criticizing my feelings, leveling the one charge I'm most vulnerable to: certain marks of authenticity are missing from my story. "You say you had a crush on a woman teacher, fantasies about a close friend in college. But lots of women have those kinds of feelings. Did you ever worry about your sexuality? It all sounds so easy." We're talking on the phone and I begin to weep

uncontrollably, struggling to hide my disproportionate reaction.

What she seems to be suggesting is all the harder to take because it recalls an uneasiness familiar to me from the period between when I was first consciously attracted to women and when I declared myself a lesbian. I never believed in my right to my desires unless they overwhelmed me—and when they did, still I was afraid that I'd only “worked myself up,” as people sometimes say of children. (The peculiarity of this fear, with its suggestion that sexuality itself is something I do not feel clearly entitled to, points to what I believe to be a major dilemma for many women, no matter what their partners' gender.) I'd had similar thoughts about attractions to men, but it mattered less because those relationships were considered, by society at large, real enough until proven otherwise. When it came to loving women, the burden of proof shifted radically.

I accept an invitation to speak to a group of junior high school students on the topic “What is sexual orientation?” The young gay Black man who's sharing the bill with me agrees that we should speak mostly from our own experiences. The kids, who when we arrive are playing volleyball in the gym of the Catholic school that houses their recreational program, turn out to be curious, friendly, full of guileless stereotypes. We sprint through our erotic biographies; then, realizing we need lots of interaction to hold a squirmy audience, we hastily open the floor to questions. “Which do you like better, men or women?” a blunt little girl demands. I try to insist that that's not the point, I laugh about it afterward, but I can't deny her question's power when it's precisely the one the entire culture poses. I've voted with my cunt, haven't I? Isn't that the implication?

I exited my lesbian life with the brute efficiency of an animal gnawing its flesh to get free of the trap; with the dispatch of someone leaping from a building on fire. Instead of risking life and limb, I risked losing who I was. And I did lose some of it.

We are marked by the exiles we choose for ourselves, in subtle, daily ways, as someone who changes continents and countries is marked by the shift of language. A telltale accent, light scars on the flesh of speech.

Sometimes, when I walk the streets of Park Slope, one train stop away from the house I share with Benjamin, I fade back into the old life. In that past we love so obsessively because it is our only total secret and will never come again, I am fresh off the plane from the state of Oregon, defiantly solitary, full of skeptical hope. Dreaming of a women's revolution I already guess will be mostly metaphor, I have come all the way from Flushing on the G train to walk the shabby, as yet ungentrified park blocks, looking for my future in poems and politics. The darkened streets facilitate my drift, letting me be the looker into lighted houses. Aloft, in apartments carved from servants' quarters of splendid, crumbling brownstones, women I might love, mothers with tired, imperfect bodies and heavy breasts I'll solace with my mouth, are tucking daughters into bed.

TWO

The Clausen Way

THERE WAS NO SEX in my childhood, which began in 1950 in Coos Bay, Oregon, and wavered into consciousness in Eureka, California, a timber industry outpost where my father was employed in forest products research. No dirty jokes, no playing doctor or even spin the bottle, no MTV, no R-rated or X-rated movies. Thank God no brothers sticking a hand under one's dress, no boozy dads creeping into darkened bedrooms to say a lingering good-night, no too familiar uncles after Thanksgiving dinner, no hit-and-run sex ed in vacant lots.

In the world of my childhood, there was no graffiti. No cocks and balls decorating toilet stalls, no "Ashley gives great head," no "Pull out, Lyndon, like your father should have." Certainly no "Sistahs are doin' it for themselves." No songs about sugar in bowls and organ grinders and candy men and wagons breaking down. Nobody who couldn't get no satisfaction. No "Yo, bitch, suck my dick" rap pounding out of neighbors' windows. No T-shirts reading UNBUTTON MY FLY. No unwed motherhood, no irresponsible paternity.

What there was was love and marriage, yoked together as in the Frank Sinatra song that I listened to on the neighbors' hi-fi. Marriage was what rendered you a couple, like Fred and Wilma Flintstone, or Dagwood and Blondie, or Cinderella and Prince What's-his-name. It was the trick that made the story be over in such a way that it never quite had to end. But above all it was what was on display in my parents' wedding album, each black-and-white print taking up a whole page and protected by a transparent plastic sleeve, my mother's elegant white suit the only unconventional touch (why hadn't she wanted the doll's dress and crinkly, stiff veil that adorned the dolly bride you saw on wedding cakes in bakeries?); my father that funny thing, a "groom," but looking handsome, the two of them stagily cutting the cake together, his hand guiding hers on the knife, she holding a fluffy morsel to his lips. Flowers and flowers.

Their wedding was our family's founding event, I knew, and I pored over those pictures, not reverently but with a glib interest that took everything for granted, the way a child of privilege might romp on the grounds of a patriarchal estate. Though given to philosophical pondering, I was undetained by the thought that I might have missed being summoned to existence. (My sisters, of course, would have missed being summoned too, but I was the oldest and naturally supposed my own existence counted more.)

My early knowledge of weddings included this information: following the “giving away” of the bride, the vows and rings and the permitted public kiss, the sweet white cake with the very sweet, slightly brittle frosting, and a trip with the sugary name of honeymoon, the man puts his penis in the woman’s vagina and plants the seed of a baby in her stomach. It occurred to me that the seeding operation would be embarrassing and awkward, but I understood that babies were de rigueur and bodily functions often less than elegant.

In the world of my childhood, there was no public foreplay, no mama and papa getting high and rowdy, or just impatient for bedtime and eagerly nuzzling. There were no passionate kisses hello or goodbye. Love was wholesome family entertainment. Doors stood open at all hours (or that’s what I remember), and I never heard anything unusual. No creaking beds, no sighs, no orgasmic whimpering. (It never occurred to me that there might be anything to hear.)

In effect, there was no divorce—that is, it wasn’t talked about, any more than cancer was, except hurriedly, obliquely. Among my father’s siblings, there’d been “broken marriages,” but back then we didn’t hear much about his side of the family. I can’t remember knowing that any children of my acquaintance had separated parents, though surely there were people who’d divorced in the Humboldt Unitarian Fellowship, which my parents belonged to instead of a real church and which seemed to be a kind of catchment basin for all the local oddballs—atheistic biology professors from the state college in Arcata, housewives who aspired to the stage, a raffish woman who’d attempted suicide. There was definitely no homosexuality (though kids at school said Thursday was Queers’ Day and snickered tediously at anyone caught wearing green, and Edith Pierce, our gray-haired baby-sitter, who walked with a cane because she’d had polio, had lived forever with a woman friend named Opal).

Was anything said about where not to touch oneself? Perhaps that a certain area wasn’t “sanitary,” like a toilet seat at the filling station, where you had to use the disposable paper cover. There was no objectionable language in my house, except what was intimated by stars and zigzags and exclamation points in the comics. My parents never swore, wouldn’t even say “damn.” Mother said “darn” and “my gosh” instead of “god.” Even certain commonplace vulgarisms, for instance “I’m pooped” or “butt,” were declared off limits to the Clausen children.

I first encountered the word *fuck* when I was thirteen and Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was a national sensation. Realizing that a novel of the gulag promised to combine two of my favorite literary themes—survival against grim odds (Jane Eyre at Lowood, Fletcher Christian on the *Bounty*) and the tormented soul of Russia (for a year or two I’d been gnawing my way through Dostoevsky, much to the dismay of my neighborhood librarian)—I opened it eagerly. After reading for a while, I marked my place, got up and stretched, and wandered into the next room to inquire, “Mother, what does ‘motherfucker’ mean?”

She was ironing. She gave me a stricken look, set the iron on end, and said something like: It means a man who sleeps with his own mother, where did you come across it? Probably she added that it was obscene, as though I couldn’t have gathered as much from her disconcerted gloss. I was as sorry as could be that the early warning system that usually aided me in avoiding inquiry about anything she’d consider “off-color” had failed me this time, but couldn’t help wondering why a term had been

invented for such a bizarre and surely uncommon recreation.

Admittedly, my young life's remoteness from even the most juvenile rumors of sexual indecorum says a lot about what an aloof child I was generally, sunk in a world of books and bookish thoughts, much more diligent in earning the approval of adults than I was prone to enjoy the rude and joyous company of peers. Still, the very possibility of my remaining so uninformed may suggest that the world I inhabited before 1965 was some version of the garden of sexual purity that so many people today claim to wish to restore for the sake of "allowing children to be children again."

Looking back on that world, I would like to point out that blandness is no guarantee of safety, deniability hardly the same as innocence. My lack of information didn't keep me pure. After all, the standard news of "sex," the dirty words and clumsy pictures, the so-called facts of who does what and which goes where, often remain at the level of superficial gossip. Deprived of these, I quietly acquired an indelible knowledge of bodily excitation, elaborated an economy of shame, and absorbed without its ever being spoken the awareness that some secret having to do with bodies threatened our world (the grown-ups' world, hence mine) with spectacular collapse.

Sex was like race in the world of my childhood: *not there, not there, not there*. It was a kind of negative space implied by the positive, or an elusive subatomic particle whose presence is inferred from events inexplicable in its absence. How else to account for the fact that, though these things were barely acknowledged, the moment they were put on the agenda, it appeared I already knew so much about them?

When I was quite small, I was often constipated. My mother tried to correct this condition with prunes, suppositories, close vigilance, and I think perhaps an enema or two, though here my memory is hazy. The glycerine suppositories I remember distinctly: the glass jar they came in; their cool, slightly oily feel when I was briefly allowed to touch one (you couldn't hold them, the whole point was that they melted); the exposed position, lying on one's stomach, waiting for the intrusion that couldn't be called painful yet provoked distinct unease; the wait; the promising pressure; the instruction to hold back. All of it done gently and for my own good, undoubtedly on advice from either Dr. Spock or our family pediatrician, Dr. Fleischer.

It's hard to make out, through layers of later feeling (my adult aversion to discussing bowel habits far surpassing any sexual reticence), how I initially responded to this treatment. I imagine, though, that it must have deeply impressed me that a body I didn't experience as a problem was so clearly problematic to my mother. Later, I would be an eager superintendent of the flesh, unhealthily obsessed through most of my adolescence with eating and not eating. An eventual devotee of aerobic exercise, someone who never diets but weighs herself each morning, exquisitely attuned to the shift in self-image that comes with half a pound gained or lost. Who dislikes to be observed putting things in her mouth, dislikes even more the commonplace conversation that intimates a morality of food, ubiquitous vulgar talk like her own nagging thoughts about what was or will or should or might or shouldn't be eaten.

The truth is that my mother's reaction to my stubborn digestive tract, her worried yet carefully rational intervention, was characteristic of her entire mothering style. Her vigilant concern extended far beyond the physical, to the intellectual and psychological development of her children—and for that very reason, being a modern

mother, she understood that her anxieties, too, required management, lest they rub off on tender minds.

It seems to me that this effort was in vain, that they did indeed rub off. And yet not in vain, because her worries meant that she loved me. At any rate, these efforts to get me to move my bowels provided me a vivid early education in the painful pleasures of exposure, of feeling another's will worked upon one's protesting body. The sensations of obedient if resentful surrender—their accompaniment the awareness of being observed in a discreditable condition, and the resultant fusion of shame and excitement—became the stuff of my earliest homemade erotic narratives.

The ur-fantasy that, at this very young age, probably between five and seven, I began to spin out for myself in bed at night, and that I guarded as my most sordid and thrilling secret: I am the only daughter of a kindly but distant father. My mother is dead. My father engages the services of a young and attractive woman—she seems to combine the skills of a trained nurse and teacher—to care for me and be my constant companion. Because I have severe difficulty moving my bowels properly, her first act as my guardian is to make me undress and subject me to a careful examination. In the following days, she experiments with various measures designed to relieve my symptoms. Of course this treatment involves a good deal of nudity (sometimes she strips to keep me company, we spend a lot of time unclothed together in the woods) and requires that I be closely observed in the most intimate, meltingly erotic moment of all—when, my bodily need at last more exigent than my shame, trembling, I expel my excrement.

Having to go. Having to come.

Somewhere around this time I began to believe in a God of hellfire (much against the grain of anything I was hearing from the Humboldt Unitarians), and because I felt that this all-knowing authority could hardly approve of my self-excitation, I tried to think holier thoughts before falling asleep, but met with only limited success. There was another fantasy I tried to stifle as well, one I remember less distinctly, involving tiny naked people, male and female, who were in my power to humiliate and whip (I, who had been spanked with judicious restraint, and only at the rarest intervals).

So it transpired that on the one hand, swayed by Christian schoolmates and the nuns who got to me in the lobby of the Catholic hospital where my mother, for once insufficiently vigilant, parked me while she visited a friend who'd had a baby, I was worrying about eternal damnation because I hadn't been baptized and trying to decide whether dolls were included in the commandment forbidding graven images. On the other hand, all on my own, I was cooking up tales that even in a far later, libertine age would cause a red alert on the V-chip. Because I have no memory of masturbating, and the fantasies themselves weren't precisely "genital," I can plausibly claim that this wasn't official sex, that entity in which my childhood was lacking. It was only the raw stuff that sex is made of, as potent as uncut heroin.

It would appear that at the time, just past my third birthday, when I had to come to terms with the arrival of a sister, I expressed my outrage by renouncing further childhood, forthwith annexing myself to adult society. There I could aspire to be another sort of "only" and did indeed succeed to a considerable degree, basking in compliments on my verbal precocity, enjoying the favor of neighbors and teachers,

serving as Father's little helper out at the building site where he was sawing and hammering up our new home from scratch. Thus I maintained myself at a precarious remove from infant stupidity and its custodian, my mother.

But wasn't it also the flesh itself that I was so eager to escape? The nursery world of shit and piss and senseless screams. Of "innocent" nakedness that uneasily recalled my own concurrent experience of self-aware exposure. A world of incessant, voracious feeding. Of human reproduction's indiscreet physicality, which I witnessed twice in quick succession (a second, even more superfluous sibling trailing the first by eighteen months): my mother's stomach expanding beneath a maternity smock, understood as the uniform of a mild and dowdy martyrdom; her complaints of varicose veins. The birth itself, of course, was tucked away in the hospital, and infant formula rendered obsolete the queasy miracle of breast milk.

I was only to have sisters. This world of the body, its dangerous caprices, its pleasures bought at the price of sharp humiliation, was ineluctably female. *It was I.* But then, in my family it always has felt somehow as though masculinity were recessive.

So much for the secrets I kept from my adults. Now I come back to their secret, the thing about bodies that seemed to agitate them in much the way that a bucket of quite ordinary water could terrify the Wicked Witch of the West.

A Jewish woman relates a parable of woman's modesty, taught to her in religious school: during a dire episode of anti-Semitic persecution, a virtuous Jewish woman was to be tortured for her faith, made an example of, dragged through the streets behind horses. To ensure that her private parts would not be exposed, she took her needle and sewed her skirts to her own flesh. This was female heroism.

There were no such parables in my early training. I was never told that my most important task in life was to keep concealed what lived between my legs. Unlike the West Indian child in Jamaica Kincaid's wonderful story "Girl," I received no warnings against impending sluthood. I escaped the Catholic lessons on sexual morality that Chicana poet and playwright Cherrie Moraga, in her essay "A Long Line of Vendas," sums up in the chilling phrase "inocencia meant dying rather than being fucked." I recall no equivalent to the harsh commands I sometimes hear in the subway—"Pull your skirt down!" "Keep your legs together!"—though I grew up in a skirt-wearing culture that forbade pants (or "slacks," as my mother called them; "changing into slacks" signified great informality) for girls in public school classrooms.

I don't mean to suggest that these parallel examples reflect precisely identical concerns. The friend who told the story of the modest seamstress believes that Orthodox Jewish anxieties about exposed female flesh have to do with what is assumed to be women's strong erotic nature; in the Mexican Catholic tradition evoked by Moraga, sex appears as an external threat, a masculine force that corrupts the woman who sins by failing to preserve her virginal purity. A comparative study of various societies' preoccupations with women's modesty would no doubt prove as fascinating for the significant variations revealed as for the many parallels that signal control of the female body as an especially potent cross-cultural theme.

The fact that I heard neither parables nor detailed instructions concerning the modesty appropriate to my gender does not mean that my parents or my people lacked

convictions on the subject. On the contrary, it indicates not only the sort of child I was, preternaturally quick to pick up wordless clues, but also something telling about my social station. *We weren't the kind of people who had to talk about it*: that was crucial to the lesson I was learning. Unlike the girl in Kincaid's story, for example, I had not been branded by histories of slavery and the racist legends invented to justify it as oversexed and highly available, a slut until proven otherwise. I was born a nice girl, and would have to work damn hard if I aspired to anything better.

How ironic that my Unitarian Sunday school training in global understanding actually offered me an account of my own acculturation process—though without, of course, ever really illuminating the peculiarity of our local folkways. I can still hear the quavery grandmother's voice intoning, *No, no, that is not the Hopi Way*, on a record set entitled *Ways of Mankind*, which the fellowship's Religious Education Committee had provided for my consumption, along with grape juice and soda crackers, while most of the grown-ups gathered on folding chairs to hash over the theology of Tibetan Buddhism, the strategy behind Adlai Stevenson's campaign, or the sinister implications of the H-bomb.

Once I could read fluently, I often dipped into Dr. Spock, deriving a strange mixture of reassurance and titillation from learning about myself and my normal development. (*Normal* was a key word for the doctor, right up there with *wholesome* and the disastrous *maladjusted*.) Of course the normal is thought to be natural, unfolding inevitably unless interfered with, but in retrospect the whole process appears almost dizzyingly convoluted: Mother consulting Spock on how to produce healthy offspring ("You can say, for instance, 'Mother doesn't want you to do that again,' or 'That isn't polite,' and shoo the children out to some other activity. That's usually enough to stop sex play for a long time in normal children"); then I (in truth too advanced in my verbal skills not to stir some unease about my normality) reading him for insight into who and what I was, and thereby becoming even more aware of the calculation that attended my production. Might my mother then have resorted once again to the book to reassure herself that my curiosity was wholesome, or at least not indicative of incipient maladjustment? Where would it end?

In a further irony, Spock's detailed advice about how to manage children's bodies without acknowledging the disturbing intensity of certain fleshly events served me as my first commercial pornography. I particularly savored the sections on taking a rectal temperature, giving an enema, and the changes of puberty: "When a girl is on the threshold of womanhood, it's good for her to be looking forward to it happily, not feeling scared or resentful. The best thing to emphasize about menstruation is that the uterus is being prepared for the time she will be a mother." I would characterize this passage now as a happy pornography of order: the forces of cheerful common sense and vigorous matter-of-factness accomplish painlessly what previous ages imposed through ruthless force, forestalling sexual anarchy, promoting feminine submission, guiding adolescent libido toward the safe harbor of marriage. (Not even the "extensively revised and enlarged" 1957 edition, by the way, mentions homosexuality explicitly; "sissiness," however, rates a cautionary note: "If a boy of 3 or 4 or 5 is avoiding boys or is regularly preferring to take the part of a mother or girl in house play, he is probably afraid of being a boy and needs child-guidance help.") Order appealed to me powerfully in those years, and except when I was racked by fears of

hell and death and mayhem, the doctor's tale seemed plausible enough, coexisting comfortably with my own disorderly impulses.

At school, when I "twirled" on the metal bar at recess (you sat atop the bar with one leg crooked over it and flung your body forward, hanging on with both hands, hoping that your dress wouldn't hike up too much as you made the dizzying circuit and returned to an upright position), I might hear a taunting "I see London, I see France. . ." from some of the other girls. (Twirling, by the way, was strictly a girls' activity.) From this mockery I gleaned a notion of decorum that linked up to my mother's care and modesty in dressing. It's only now as I write about it that I fully appreciate the perversely brilliant cultural logic that mandates apparel designed to expose precisely what is deemed most in need of concealment: the hoyden's panties, the lady's underskirt (I used to enjoy a regular *Reader's Digest* column called "Pardon, Your Slip Is Showing"), the Jewish heroine's vagina. The perversity is heightened by the fact that the unreliable garment of course gets assigned to those whose genitals are deemed more private, more vulnerable, more scandalous when viewed. The logic lies in the far-reaching effects of the habits inculcated by this threat of exposure. If hoop skirts and corsets used to impose mechanical restraint on the movements of upper-class females, then the short cotton dresses in which I was reared were a comprehensive course in unconscious self-control and the importance of incessant self-monitoring, all focused on that portion of the body synonymous with sex.

"Private parts." The tender leaf-fold of little girls' pudenda, familiar to me above any part of the body, as though I'd grown up in a baby female nudist camp. My sisters', or my own? What perspective would I have had on my own, back then when my body was as supple as thought? Even now, when I see a small boy's genitals, they strike me as alien, as somehow rudimentary.

Did I really get a look at my father's penis in the bathroom? Unlikely as it sounds, I seem to remember it.

Recently I attended an exhibit of traditional African art and was amazed to find female figures carved complete with pendant labia and plump clitorises. I realized I'd expected a conventional Barbie blank, maybe a piggy bank slit at best. (Dr. Spock again, being clever: "I heard of a little girl who complained to her mother, 'But he's so fancy and I'm so plain.'") I felt oddly moved to think any sculptor would take the trouble.

Sex is something private. I have heard my mother say so, perhaps by way of sending a merciful signal that, appearances to the contrary, she does not deny the power of arousal or the importance of satisfaction. If I had to articulate the core message I received about eros, it would be this axiom (really a commandment). *Sex is private* holds the key to my impression that my parents thought their world might fall apart if something happened to call too much attention to matters they kept claiming were not so important anyway. (Mother, what does *motherfucker* mean?) *Sex is private* was the given, the a priori, the "No, no, that is not the Clausen way" that, figuratively speaking, was forever in my ears. And, much as any such oracular utterance seems to call for an explanation, it would be futile to request one from those whose lives it

guided. For exegesis might subvert its power, much as sex itself, a salutary force when confined to the silence of the marriage bed, becomes a horror when advertised, paraded, spread around.

I thought about this value of sexual privacy when I viewed *The Gay Agenda*, a slickly made Christian Right video that was massively distributed during the 1992 campaign leading up to passage of Colorado's infamous Amendment 2, which prohibited gay civil rights legislation. The purported "agenda" is largely represented through highly selective coverage of Gay Pride marches in several cities. These visuals predictably focus on the most sexually flamboyant or transgressive participants—the S/M contingents, the simulated sex acts, the echt drag queens, the members of the North American Man Boy Love Association—every so often cutting away to shots of gay and lesbian parents with small children, who are presumably being subjected to the same barrage of sexual theater that is delivered to the viewer via careful collation of clips from events on two coasts. The variety, humor, political seriousness, and sheer anarchic fun of Gay Pride disappear; homosexuality is rendered as the one-dimensional threat of people who *parade* their sex in public.

My parents are religious and political liberals who would abhor this video's homophobic message. Yet its insidious appeal to those who value sexual privacy seems to me designed to tap into a deep vein of social conservatism that many otherwise liberal or moderate people hold in common with those politically far to their right. *Sex is private* may imply the wish to guard something too precious (like "one's deepest feelings") to be publicly exposed, insofar as it is embraced as a personal preference by people whose desire is socially tolerated or encouraged, and who can therefore be presumed to have freely chosen to be circumspect about their erotic lives. But the historical and continuing role of the closet, of *enforced* privacy, gives lesbians and gay men a rather different perspective on the matter. Because "the love that dare not speak its name" has been so stigmatized, even liberal heterosexuals' insistence on maintaining a sharp distinction between public and private spaces and confining erotic expression to the latter may seem tantamount to saying, "We acknowledge your right to do those disgusting things, but please don't tell us about it."

The ideal of privacy also works to keep straight women in line. The notion of sexual propriety I was raised with was not a double standard in quite the same sense in which "inocencia meant dying" could be said to be one, given that modesty and marital fidelity were expected of men, too. However, women clearly had more of a stake in these virtues; exposure of *our* sex could do lasting damage. We could lose our reputations, we could get pregnant. Our sex was who we were, men's simply something they did.

I can see now, as I couldn't when I first rebelled against it, the class and racial implications of our gendered circumspection. There was a strong sense that erotic display is "cheap," that women like us lower themselves when they adopt the styles of self-advertisement sometimes resorted to by poorer and darker people. This reaction was less a recoil from sex per se than a way of marking off our refined version thereof. If we flaunted our charms in revealing clothing, sported bright colors and fanciful adornments, the distinction would fade and "we" would be as "they" are (the sort of girls unlikely to be chosen to bear the children of educated men). If too many

of us slid down that slippery slope, became promiscuous or had babies out of wedlock, social boundaries themselves would blur—and then who would we be? Would we still know how to recognize ourselves? Would we still be *nice girls* when bad girls had been abolished?

My parents taught the importance of balance, of healthful moderation and well-roundedness (that odd American virtue). I was tutored as patiently in math and science as in the feminine subjects, language arts and social studies. Father gave tips on diving and chess, led us into the wilderness on backpacking expeditions. My parents claimed, for they were asked about it, that they didn't mind not having had a boy. I never doubted them. I didn't mind being a girl (not in grade school, anyway). I was told, sincerely, "You can be anything." (Yet "mannish" meant a woman who was deeply unattractive, while "effeminacy" in males was even more disturbing.)

Excellence was prized, erratic brilliance disapproved. Although difficult emotions sometimes had to be acknowledged, the point was to get beyond them, to be "rational," my father's top requirement.

In my mother's view, extremes were always dangerous. The raw, the strong, the spicy or hot (in food), the loud (in voice or clothing or decor), the gaudy, the cheap, the pushy, the vulgar—these formed a constellation of negatives, foreboding real discomfort, an unspecified danger.

This is My Father's world. We sang that in Sunday school. (It was a wild anachronism. Don't even ask how it related to appreciating the Ways of Mankind.) And I did grow up in my father's world, even more so in my mother's. Yet for all that I absorbed "the Clausen Way," I never could be convinced that our planet is happily ordered, that caution and obedience guarantee prosperity or even bare survival, that privileged safety amid the general wreckage is honorable even where it might be feasible.

My childhood was cradled in the dread of a fire that would end not just my life but everybody else's. We practiced for it, starting the first month of kindergarten. With World War II barely a decade in the past, I related the dive-bomber games that boys played at recess to the famous threat of Soviet attack, imagining that each tiny airplane overhead was my signal to take cover. Suez, when I was six, was my first memorable global crisis, its theme music the fanfare and Teletype jangle that prefaced the familiar yet portentous announcement *This is the CBS Radio Network*, as Mother suspended her vacuuming or cooking to tune in to the headlines on the hour. Solemnly, for years, I spent all my little magic—first stars, wishbones, breath held in tunnels—trying to hold that final fire at bay.

The earth's lush body was mortal as my own.

At an early age, I came by basic information that it seemed my world was anxious to conceal. This life (the one we've found, the one we've made) isn't wholesome or well rounded. It is raw and loud and strong. It will kill you, yet it equips you with desires, those portents of contingent paradise.

Thus secret fears and pleasures secretly resonated. Thus I invented passion, in a world that seemed as inimical to passion as to gambling or ecstatic drunkenness, to anything that might endanger the safety of calm surfaces, the orderly pursuit of

progress. Thus (in a world where progress made the Bomb) I started to be someone who would take a lot of chances. Who'd install the disorder of sex at the center of her life. Who'd make a habit of radical departures—including startling revisions of her sexual identity. Who'd even hope that identity might serve as a simple weapon against the rule of Fathers.

Once in recent years when I was visiting my parents, we got to talking about our old excursions to Hidden Springs, a state campground not far south of Eureka. I mentioned how I used to feel frightened when we girls were put to bed in the tent while Mother and Father sat out at the picnic table, using the Coleman lantern for a reading light. I would work myself up, vividly imagining how the two of them might sneak away, hop into the station wagon and zoom off to some new life, stranding me there, not merely orphaned but marooned in the wilderness.

To my astonishment, Father seemed disturbed, as though my fantasy reproached his parenting. "But why would you have imagined such a thing? We never gave you any reason to think we'd abandon you."

I know he worked hard to give me a happy childhood, as far as possible unlike his own grimly Lutheran upbringing in a working-class neighborhood in Minneapolis. His German-American parents—a sometimes overbearing father, a mother in delicate health—had been beset by Depression money worries. He was the last child of five. It can't have been very easy.

I am moved by the loving vigilance of parents who want to believe there exists a formula whereby children can be spared the world's devouring appetites. What I would tell my father, if I knew how to do it gently, begins with this sentence: *Terror is private.*

THREE

The Education of Desire

Keep the tone wholesome. . . . Of course, the child who is moving into adolescence should know how pregnancy takes place and that there is danger of disease in being promiscuous, but these disturbing aspects of sex shouldn't come first. The adolescent should think of it as primarily wholesome and natural and beautiful . . . the happy, sensible, successful adolescent doesn't get into trouble with sex just because he hasn't been warned sternly enough. . . . The danger of scaring a sensitive child about sex is partly that you make him tense and apprehensive at the time, partly that you may destroy his or her ability to adjust to marriage later.

—Dr. Benjamin Spock, *Baby and Child Care*

WHEN DOES OFFICIAL sex begin? Let's start with the first kiss.

One night in the fall of my sophomore year of high school (it was 1965, the sixties before The Sixties), I sat on the floor of a Sunday school classroom at Eastshore Unitarian Church in suburban Bellevue, Washington. With me was Sasha Grant, a boy my elder by a year, whom I badly wanted to take an interest in me, though I couldn't have produced a good argument as to why he ought to do so. I was nobody, just a girl of fifteen who'd read some fancy books. I looked young for my age. My mind was much admired by adults, but I'd already recognized that the rapturous effect (an erotic buzz is what I'd call it now) that I sometimes experienced around the edges of an intellectual intimacy—with a stocky homeroom teacher named Miss Pease, for example, and also with my rival, the puny, sarcastic Clayton Early, who played “smartest boy” to my “smartest girl” through most of junior high—was not the sort of thrill often sought by adolescent males.

Sasha and I had met in LRY (for Liberal Religious Youth), the official Unitarian teen organization, where, in his alienated way, he was in the thick of things, along with kids like Jordie Burnham and Naomi Marks. Jordie, a crack folk dancer who (Sasha confided) fancied boys, wore his lederhosen with wry elegance. Naomi was sleepy-eyed, with the incandescent hair and pale yet glowing skin of the pre-

Raphaelite maiden she'd resemble if she lost twenty pounds and substituted a peignoir for her navy surplus bell-bottoms. She spoke slyly of sugar cubes and knew her way around The Av, the main drag of Seattle's notorious University District, in those days before LSD and psilocybin hit the major media.

I had heard Sasha refer to his cohorts as fringies, an epithet converted to a badge of pride by the post-Beat generation that frequented the U District coffeehouses, scorning honest labor in favor of pot and poetry. Given that he was speaking of high school students who hadn't really left home yet, he was stretching it a little, a fact he must have recognized; he spoke sardonically (his usual way of speaking) and put the word in the mouth of an onlooker: "Dirty fringies!" some hostile straight had sneered at him and his pals.

For so long *straight* has been paired with *gay* in my lexicon that it's strange to recall this earlier usage, which similarly split up the world into a mainstream of obedient drones and a sexy underground of courageous deviants. Straights were those who could watch *Reefer Madness* with a straight face, who had no idea that amphetamine was the active ingredient in their diet pills, who thought hash brownies led to heroin. Who couldn't see why hitting the road of excess might be preferable to paying off a mortgage on little boxes made of ticky-tacky. ("Better a junkie than a professor be," I was shortly to write in a poem entitled "Disaffection"—a rhetorical flourish, if sincerely meant, as the "heads" of my acquaintance all gave needles a wide berth.)

From a distance, Sasha projected classic, blunt-featured butch appeal, with wavy chestnut locks that he once sheared off in a buzz cut and would keep relatively short throughout the coming longhaired era. Up close, the effect was radically modified by a disastrous complexion, archipelagoes of purplish acne fanning across his face and chest. His body was slim, a generic young white man's body, though hardly muscular; physical culture was a straight pursuit. If illegal drugs still represented an affectation for him, his nicotine addiction was full-blown, as proof of which he sported yellow stains on the first two fingers of his smoking hand. He suffered from a sinus condition that prompted frequent blowings of his slightly lumpy nose on wads of toilet paper he stuffed into his pockets. His jack-o'-lantern grin had something feminine about it. He didn't grin very often.

The rawness of his skin suggested the rawness of himself. He entertained a chronic, subterranean grievance. His talk was abrasive, almost pugilistic, larded with references to his enemies "the fuzz" ("the heat," "the state bulls") and rhetorical victories over "feeble-minded old ladies" who tried to tell him about religion. He mocked and shocked. He derided flag-wavers, then turned around and blasted smug Canadians who'd rather rank on the U.S. than address their own social failings. He quoted LeRoi Jones (approvingly) on the subject of killing whites. He used the expression "nigger lipping." Notwithstanding all the posturing he did, I know he believed deeply—who can say why?—in the finality of his exile from everything that mattered.

All fall we'd been colliding at LRY events, talking almost as though we shared an understanding. His stern iconoclasm, his corrosive irony, the integrity I was eager to detect in the disrepute he cultivated, all had attracted me since I'd joined the group back in August. (I have to admit I'd also initially embraced much that Sasha would

shortly teach me to disdain for its Unitarian, liberal earnestness: a debate between a John Bircher and an ACLU spokesman, the advanced views of George Fava, our assistant minister, who wanted contraceptives delivered in tap water, the uplift in what Jordie Burnham satirized as “happy Jesus songs.”) But on the night of our encounter on the Sunday school classroom floor, I had yet to receive an unequivocal sign that I’d succeeded in positioning myself as girlfriend material.

At the time, I’d never been on what is called a “date.” I loathed the fanfare surrounding puberty, the publicity attending sexual emergence, all the business of “first” thises and thats, first bras, first dates, first kisses. I’d been burned by junior high sock hops and ballroom dancing lessons, but of course an LRY party was nothing like those corny rites. Despite the deafening presence of a live band in the versatile church sanctuary, it was pretty clear that the advertised dance was largely meant to satisfy an adult prejudice in favor of structured activity. Kids in daring (for 1965) attire—pierced ears and long straight hair were still remarkable *on girls*—hung in the parking lot, chatting elliptically, tapping their Players or Camel nonfilters on the hoods of cars to pack the tobacco before lighting up.

I must have seemed an unlikely candidate to join their anti-club. I was wearing, I guess, a demure blouse and skirt, my nylons cinched to a garter belt or girdle. (I was carefully thin but wore girdles anyway; they were part of the standard harness of womanhood, and I always was a sucker for hardship in the name of self-improvement.) I didn’t smoke. I’d never been high. I couldn’t say *shit* or *fuck* in a natural tone of voice. My near perfect grade point average was as much an embarrassment to me as inherited wealth to a young Communist, for in my heart I hated all this excellence and virtue. I looked to LRY to help me get beyond it.

The evening began propitiously, I thought, with Sasha inviting me to view a nearby refuse disposal plant. I accepted graciously, as if I understood the point; among the LRYers, I had noticed, nothing could mark you as dismally uncool so quickly as requiring explanations. My best guess was that he intended a nod to the Beat aesthetic that sought transcendence in trash. The brief excursion unfolded decorously enough, but when we returned to the party he laid his arm across my shoulder, leaving it there where even Reverend Fava could see. Exultant and embarrassed, I finally had proof that he’d decided we were together for the evening.

We adjourned to the wing of classrooms, a separate building from the sanctuary, to listen to what was then called folk music—anything with an acoustic guitar, from Leadbelly to Richard and Mimi Fariña—on a portable record player. I was where I’d longed to be, in the dark with a lawless boy. The floor was hard, the record ended, the conversation flagged. I felt conscious of my inexperience, afraid to blow my chances before they’d even been defined. Sasha had on jeans, scuffed boots, a capacious leather jacket—soft, intimately stained brown leather—with fringes on the sleeves. He smelled like damp leather, and like the loose tobacco he carried with him to roll cheap cigarettes when he couldn’t afford Pall Malls, as he brought his face close to mine in the dark, and I felt the incongruity of his tongue, its sloppy wetness shocking on my firmly closed lips.

I flinched, turned my head aside. He didn’t press his suit. My resistance had nothing of calculation in it; the contact seemed an intolerable infringement (I couldn’t have said of what). *Surely this isn’t how it’s done* was what I felt; “it” meant to me no

one specific act, but an enormous, nameless realm of interaction. I might have been licked by a well-meaning dog, or swiped by a dripping dishcloth. I intuited, too, that my objection was expected, that to submit to this abrupt caress would send the wrong signal. But I wasn't faking my embarrassment. I knew his lunge had been inept, yet couldn't help suspecting that I should somehow have averted the moment's awkwardness.

But Sasha didn't seem to hold my self-defense against me, to judge by the fact that he offered to drive me home in his parents' Morris Minor, a cramped, decrepit, but glamorous vehicle (my family had never owned a foreign car) that later would figure importantly in our sex life. He dropped me off in my tidy cul-de-sac, and I performed the soon-to-be-standard maneuver of deciding, on the way to the front door, what bone of partial truth to fling my discreetly hovering parents. Bone flung, I hurried to my bedroom in the basement to write all in my secret journal, explaining my rejection of the slobbery tongue by noting modestly that "it was so new."

I'd read *On the Road* just a few weeks before, Sasha having lent me a well-thumbed paperback with a hint that it had a number of things to teach me. I'd loved it, above all the part where queer Carlo Marx and heterosexually hyperactive Dean Moriarty, wired on speed, spend hours every day "trying to communicate with absolute honesty and absolute completeness everything on our mind." I saw myself, my longings, in this heroic intercourse; I was more unsure of my relationship to other passages, those concerned with making blondes, balling creamy-thighed brunettes, just in general digging as much as possible "that lil ole gal with that lil sumpin down there tween her legs, boy."

All my high-flown salacious reading had failed to prepare me for the way in which the literalness of bodies would have to condition this thing known as sex, which I'd imagined as a footnote to the urgent union of two tumescent, somehow genderless, consciousnesses.

My adolescent embrace of heterosex was many things: a means to radical intimacy in a bookish life practically devoid of ordinary friendships, an objective correlative for a deep anarchy of being that all the beige drapery of middle-class convention couldn't quite conceal, a paradoxical defiance of my feminine condition. Importantly, it was pleasure at times, but even when it was more ambiguous, even when it was pain, it was at least sensation, the feeling of *something*, anything extreme, instead of the infuriating blandness that had been palmed off on me and so much of my postwar generation as a form of happiness. Of course teens of both genders nursed a similar sort of grudge, but for the girl I was it had a different edge, a rage at the duplicity of a social order that had begun by promising I could be anything, only to inform me when it came down to it that I had to be a woman. What I did with Sasha was in part my naive attempt to collect on that old promise: I'd go anywhere the boys went. It was also the beginning of my hope (an era's hope) that my sexuality could be a radical force, smashing old worlds and helping to fashion new ones. My later discovery that I could love women would continue that revolt by other means.

I suddenly did not want to fulfill the potential everyone said I had, and which my elders and betters so painstakingly nurtured. I suddenly saw that they lacked ambition for me. I seethed with contempt for their notion of achievement, which seemed to

have added up to little more than endless sessions in the school cafeteria, a number-two pencil clutched in my competitive small hand, hearing again the familiar instructions about “filling in the bubble” on the printed answer sheet of some standardized text, in order that a machine might tabulate my score and see if the Russians were getting ahead of us.

In the matter of sex (since I had to be a woman), my first imperative was not to be my mother. I hastened to burn my bridges to “the Clausen way,” with its sense that eros should, like Danish modern furniture, or mood music, or a two-piece outfit, be tasteful and inoffensive. I would find another way to be a woman. I would be sexual, as my mother was not (or thought it was important to appear not to be). Claiming the right to pleasure, deploying my body as I pleased, I would defy that superstition called the double standard, which lurked at the heart of my uneasy sense that my gender had, when I entered puberty, taken on a new and alarming relevance.

“A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion.” Radicalesbians said that in 1970, in a famous manifesto, “The Woman Identified Woman.” In some sense I still believe it to be true, but as with many a brilliant epigram (“Power corrupts,” “The personal is political”), its fascination rests on a crucial ambiguity.

Radicalesbians forgot to point out that all women do not share the same rage. The rage that would eventually help condense my woman-identification was not the rage of the woman who, from an early age, has been punished for her gender nonconformity—the girl who played softball and soccer too well, failed to slough off her attachment to a girlfriend when her crowd began to date, or carried herself too much like a boy, eliciting hostile stares when she entered the ladies’ room ambiguously clad in jeans and a windbreaker. My rage was the rage of a girl whose brain was her fortune, whose body at first seemed reasonably attuned to the requirements of standard femininity—from throwing a softball badly to engaging in sex with men—but who in the end was unable to reconcile cosmopolitan intellectual ambitions with the provincial conventions of middle-class womanhood.

Why, when I emerged from my childhood garden of solitude, did I turn to a boy for the connection I craved? It wasn’t about bodies, not in the first place. It was about what sort of beings seemed to have the gorgeous minds, about who were the movers and shakers, the ones with automatic access to the wide world I’d lately begun to fear I might be excluded from. It was about identifying with Kerouac’s Dean and Carlo (distancing myself from that creamythighed brunette, who was obviously stupid, and sexy in a way with which I couldn’t imagine successfully competing). It was about what was expected and plainly possible (*I could do men*). It was about, in other words, compulsory heterosexuality, not in the sense that my desires weren’t real or that my participation was blatantly coerced, but in the far more effective sense that I was choosing from a menu of socially preset options, responding to cues designed to mobilize one set of desires rather than another. Unable to imagine an alternative, I eagerly cooperated.

I’d never met a girl I considered really smart. My having missed out on the passionate friendships many little girls enter into had something to do with the semirural isolation of our home in Eureka, but also, I think, with the facts of my

temperament. For me, private thoughts and sentences in books held much of the glow of diffuse eroticism that children often discover in social pursuits, and that, whatever its early origins, persists in adult life, a penumbra of fantasy frequently ignored in the glare and clamor of official sex. When Mother prodded me to “have a friend home after school,” I did it more because I was supposed to than because I savored the company of any girl in particular. I much preferred to hang around adults, or play or read alone in the woods at the top of our gravel road.

Father’s transfer from Eureka to the Seattle area when I was in the fifth grade brought a new suburban lifestyle, a new affluence and lust for normalcy. I pored over my mother’s magazines, *McCall’s* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*, clipping pictures of beautiful objects, planning my future perfect life, in which great achievements and flawless surfaces would complement each other à la Jackie Kennedy. I entered into some prepubescent friendships—which, it went without saying, had to be with girls—but these were duteous, artificial, undertaken in something like the spirit in which a gay or lesbian teen may attempt a simulation of opposite-sex romance. I went through the motions of group participation, lugging T.E. Lawrence’s *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* along to Camp Sealth on Vashon Island, escaping into it every chance I got; I pondered Lawrence’s capture and beating at Deraa (*the citadel of my integrity had been irrevocably lost*, what could he possibly mean by that?) against a backdrop of phony “Indian” Camp Fire Girl rituals (*I light the light of work, WoHeLo means work*). I savored the thought of male bonding in the desert to deflect the twittering of thirteen-year-olds beneath the western red cedar.

For a time I consorted with kind, green-eyed Roberta, and quiet Hope, who was blond but no more glamorous than I: diligent, healthy girls from diligent, healthy families who got good grades, weren’t silly about boys, and bored me to a degree I could never justify. I despised the usual teen enthusiasms: dances that made you look like an idiot, rock ’n’ roll groups that attracted howling feminine hordes, “ratted” hairdos and the accompanying hairspray overkill that turned a trip to the girls’ bathroom into a gauntlet of perfumed smog.

In ninth grade I had a crush on Miss Pease, whose assignments on topics like “My Concept of Freedom” had prompted me to share concerns I’d revealed to no one else. “Tell me, Miss Pease,” I wrote (in a note appended to a paper that argued, “Even a criminal, if he has freedom of the soul, is more a man than one who never thinks”): “Am I a hopeless case? Will I be an existentialist? Am I an adolescent idealist?” She’d thrilled me by responding, “If you are, so am I,” then going on to explain why in a breathtaking density of tiny blue-inked lines, set at an angle to my own rounded script.

Miss Pease was thirtyish, plain, with buck teeth and thick-lensed glasses, her brown hair in a brief, utilitarian cut. Though I confided to my journal my excitement that she considered me a “kindred mind,” I didn’t take our flirtation all that seriously. I wanted to fall for a role model, and Miss Pease wasn’t that. I aspired to greatness, and couldn’t help recognizing that teaching P.E. and language arts at the junior high level was not an exalted line of work. I never heard her called a dyke—the kids I knew didn’t talk that way—but she once acknowledged to me that people saw her as a kook. Any hint of oddity could turn me off in those days; I still hoped that “great” would be compatible with “normal.”

I wonder, looking back, what she felt. I imagine it resembled what I experience these days when I notice that a student has a minor crush on me. There's a rueful sense of the fragility of all such transference, an urge to escape before the spell is shattered. I owed nothing to Miss Pease, and I'm sure she expected nothing, or rather expected precisely what happened—that I would go on to high school and forget about her. Yet when I think of the ease of that transition, how quickly I reverted to assuming that kindred minds would belong to males, I feel that I committed the capital offense of “leaving a woman for a man” *avant la lettre*.

When I entered high school in the tenth grade, I began to perceive the tension between my habits of compliance and the dangerous extremes that so drew me in literature. I'd already concluded, while reading Simone de Beauvoir, that sexual intercourse outside of marriage was morally okay, though I didn't believe I'd have the courage for it. I must have thought it just didn't happen in a decorous place like Bellevue. If in Paris free sex might follow on freethinking, with us it wasn't free but *premarital*—the folly of people presumed not to think at all.

My parents grasped the Paris precedent. In a skirmish that heralded the total war to come, and in flagrant violation of their long-standing principle that youthful curiosity should never be repressed, they insisted I defer my planned reading of Sartre and books on Communism until I got to college.

They couldn't, however, as pillars of Bellevue's Eastshore Unitarian congregation, prevent me from joining Liberal Religious Youth. Back in Eureka, during my time of faith, their Unitarianism had been a misery to me, though I kept to myself my terror that all five of us would burn, Mother and Father because they were scarcely better than atheists, my sisters and I because the Unitarians don't bother with baptism. I used to pray that they'd convert to being more like other people, join a church with a minister instead of that ragtag fellowship. Now I prayed for contact with a world of deviants, and respectable-looking Eastshore (which had two ministers, though it still went easy on the sacraments) became my go-between.

For years Mother had fretted that I wouldn't be well rounded, had urged me to cultivate “kids your own age.” Now that I'd found some, she tried to put the brakes on, repeatedly insisting that I was still too young, only a tenth-grader, for this or that LRY function. I could attend weekly chapter meetings, held at the church, but those were pretty tame; I wanted stronger stuff. She and Father balked at letting me attend the famous weekend conferences, sponsored by our “Fed”—a loose association of LRY groups throughout the Pacific Northwest, including Canada—which often meant out-of-town travel.

At least at first (for I later grew devious), my indignation at their inconsistency was keenly felt, not merely rhetorical. They had always appeared to be democratic parents, had boasted of trusting their daughters' good judgment. Now it seemed to me that their trust had been a sham, because it ceased when I quit choosing precisely what they'd choose. Overnight I made the change from model child to sullen captive and began my lifelong quarrel—a family feud—with liberalism.

“Uptight” is the sixties word that most appropriately evokes my parents' fatal inability to smile at the pretensions of the teen bohemia that now commanded my allegiance. Much less could they see George Fava's point of view; he delivered a Youth Sunday sermon floridly entitled “The Mustard Seed and the Frug—Or,

Adolescent Anxiety-à-Go-Go,” in the course of which he played “Hang On, Sloopy” from the pulpit. He credited us anxious adolescents with all sorts of hidden virtues, but Sasha and Jordie mercilessly mocked him, and claimed that the song’s lyrics referred to oral sex.

Right off, my parents spotted Sasha Grant as an even bigger threat than books on Communism. Their skittishness put me at a terrible disadvantage. Male, with a driver’s license and far more obliging parents, Sasha ranged freely; I was kept on a short, short leash. To top it off, we attended different high schools. I faced the daunting task of appearing available (but not too forward, girlishly eager, or boyishly aggressive) while being guarded by my parents like a princess in a tower.

Perhaps inspired by my dalliance with Miss Pease, I solved my problem by writing him letters. The first of these was a model of circumspection, as chaste and intellectual a come-on as ever girl addressed to boy. Paradoxically, writing it afforded me a sense of erotic mastery, as though I’d dared to strip to my nakedest desires, but in a situation where I felt far more powerful than in a face-to-face encounter. Vain even then about my sentences as others are about the flesh, I was confident that I sounded interesting. (Meanwhile, I filled up my journal with unabashed self-loathing, deriding myself as a “*stupid & foolish* little whore” who had vainly “thought I would get away from woman’s idiotic position.”) How very like me, I now see, to start a love affair that way, to intuit, despite my inexperience, that decking out my feelings in carefully chosen language and offering them up in the ritual of a letter would afford me access to an erotic authority such as I rarely enjoy in ordinary life, though I do experience it in certain moments of lovemaking.

For me, sex and text were already closely linked through my habits of inferring the erotic world from books and of rehearsing and dissecting secret feelings in a journal. Like my hope that sex could be radically transformative, this link between writing and desire would also become a theme of my later life with women. For now, the written word was a way of deciphering my identity as a modern heterosexually active girl—which I saw, of course, in keeping with the times, as timeless, a version of some universal feminine destiny. I wanted to see it also as universally human, but my ambition to go everywhere the boys went coexisted with the insidious belief that women were fated to unhappy difference, and furthermore that eroticism, more than brains or uterus, was the thing that sealed that fate.

Like many an adolescent—probably most in my generation, just before the explosion of sex in the visual media forever altered the terms of my culture’s fantasy life—I used certain passages in fiction simultaneously to inflame and to inform. I hoped to learn not only what people did but which of those things might be counted real and normal. My memory is cluttered with deathless prose like the moment in *Exodus* where Ari kisses Kitty’s breast, and she, though aroused, refuses him, saying, “I don’t want to be made. I guess I was just overcome by the moonlight.” At the same time, I definitely got the erotic buzz from certain “queer” passages involving my male heroes. Carlo and Dean communicating intensely, T.E. Lawrence captured and tormented—I wished to insert myself into these scenes, though it was plainly impossible that a woman should be present.

The whole business was circular in a way that my bookishness perhaps intensified, but that points to a deeper irony in the common concept of sex-as-nature. That

concept, to which I wholeheartedly subscribed, involved me in frequent consultations of authorities who I hoped would tell me *how* to fulfill my erotic destiny. I didn't think to question why it shouldn't just emerge without a fuss, why consciousness and memory had to be poked and prodded, why I needed to worry about distinguishing authentic desires from possible counterfeits. And I do seem to have worried quite a lot, for the suspicion that desire might be a mirage, a mere reflection of things I'd read, forms a recurring theme in my adolescent journals.

My sex was made of words as much as flesh. For now, I was stuck with the visions of male authors. Later on, my becoming a lesbian would be all bound up with the hope that women could write the book.

My cul-de-sac was in an area known as Lochmoor, one of the newer metastases of our aggressive little suburb. By contrast, Sasha and his folks and an uninteresting sister occupied an older two-story frame house on Mercer Island. In summer, we could swim off their dock. Mr. and Mrs. Grant had a modest flare for good living that seemed cosmopolitan, faintly decadent, compared to what I knew. Yet Mr. Grant worked for Boeing, like so many Seattle-area fathers. I think he had served in the navy during World War II. Sasha said he kept Trojans in his dresser drawer. He was often seen with a transparent drink in hand, a white-filtered L&M in the inevitable ashtray, gazing out over the water with a narrow-eyed expression that discouraged interaction, which was okay with me. I was wary of the lively sarcasm that lived inside his world-weary shell. "Hard-bitten" is a term that occurs to me to describe him. At the time I couldn't see what he and Sasha had in common.

Mrs. Grant, a small, plump woman who taught in a Montessori school, had gone to Columbia University. Though she was a mother and nothing glamorous, I imagine this background impressed me, as did the fact that M.F.K. Fisher had a place on her kitchen shelf. (In my house we dined from the *Betty Crocker Cookbook*, and a clove of garlic was considered radical.) Sasha made me read Fisher's *Gastronomical Me*; that and Jane Jacobs's *Death and Life of Great American Cities* were the two works by women that he admired sufficiently to include on the syllabus of my crash course in being his lover, concubine, and all-around companion. I was taught to roll my own tobacco and cannabis cigarettes, act sober even when very, very stoned, and respect his obsession with steam railroads and old sailing vessels and Civil War military strategy. He cultivated a romance of outmoded technology and the male culture that went with it.

I thought that his terrible relationship to school (where I couldn't stop excelling, no matter how I misbehaved) was a mark of intellectual seriousness. It seems to me now that he was in search of a style, much more than he was ever attracted by ideas. He was adamant about his aesthetic philosophy, and persuaded me to buy expensive black leather riding boots that came to just below the knee and were impossible to walk in and generally useless for anything outside a riding academy or a fancy European brothel. His notion of courtliness was to inform me in a letter: "You're getting prettier every day. Soon I'll even turn away from a Friendship Sloop to look at you."

I recall my years with Sasha—I was eighteen when they ended—like a graph of sex that might be plotted on two coordinates: the things we did, the places where we did them. As with kids everywhere, our erotic life was homeless, though toward the end, when I'd been away at college and we knew his mother wouldn't hassle us, we'd sometimes fuck in Sasha's room with its splintery floor and elaborate graffiti of Celtic knotwork and quotations from Nikos Kazantzakis inked directly on the walls.

Before that, our venues were legion. There were frequent parking sessions—both their romance and discomfort heightened by the Northwest winter rains, with their distinctive permeating chill and gloom—in either the Morris Minor or Sasha's parents' station wagon, the back seat of which folded down to make a hard shelf-like bed. One time we were using this handy accommodation in a vacant lot near Eastshore Church when a car pulled in behind us, its high beams like a searchlight. My first terrified thought was of a lovers'-lane slasher.

"Heat," Sasha groaned, and started buttoning his Levi's.

The cop surveyed us with his flashlight, shook his head at our explanations. (Officer, we were talking. We got sleepy. We just lay down to take a little nap.) I trembled lest he decide to call my parents, but in the end he let us go.

More than any other symbol of our nomadic lust, I think of the so-called goat shed, a shack at the edge of Sasha's parents' property, overrun with blackberry vines and booby-trapped with broken glass, but with a tiny loft to which one perilously ascended via a makeshift ladder, to recline on a stained mattress and make out by candlelight. From this remove, the fire danger in that shack seems nearly as alarming as all the other risks—pregnancy, bad trips, poisonous chemicals in our drugs, arrests for possession, accidents from driving stoned—that we worked up to running over the seasons of our angst. Sasha made much of my inexperience, doling out new challenges (Dexedrine, fellatio) as he thought I could handle them.

I had no standards in those days for how pleasure ought to feel, and yielded frequently, half-anxious to comply, half-wanting to see where any new sensation might lead. *I wish I was on some / Australian mountain range*, my idol Bob Dylan jeered. Like him, I hoped for a change, however random, so I'd drop six bitter No Doz at school between second and third periods. I'd sit still in a pitch-dark closet, trying to ratchet my mind to some Zen plateau of no-thought. I'd let Sasha hold a burning cigarette to my bare back.

We spent many an evening in that goat shed while ostensibly in Seattle at a movie theater. Sasha would park the car a short distance from his house; there wasn't much chance his parents would spot it in the winding lanes of their neighborhood, which was slightly overgrown and shabby and far more sophisticated than the recently bulldozed tract where our developer was considered sensitive for sparing a few Douglas firs. My own parents, I thought, wouldn't dare investigate as long as I had a plausible cover story. I read reviews of the movies I'd said we were seeing and tried to make it home more or less on time.

Fittingly, horribly, my writing betrayed me. At the end of sophomore year they searched my room, located my secret journal, read that I was thinking of having intercourse—a step that seemed to me like a natural progression, though without it, precisely due to its deferral, I was enjoying sex as hot as any I'd know for years to

come—panicked, suspended my contact with Sasha, and packed me off to a psychiatrist, whom I treated like a probation officer. In the end, of course, I was stronger than their panic, being ferociously single-minded. There wasn't a lead-lined coffin in all of Bellevue that could hold me.

Hot sex: that reigning cliché of our time, like family values or free markets. What does it mean to say that our sex was heated?

There was no shape, no resolution—I want to say no *form*—to what we did in the goat shed all those months that I was technically a virgin. Nobody came, which made it rarely egalitarian, and masochistic, and irresistible, like being condemned to burn in paradise. It was hallucinatory in its endlessness, its improvisatory Ornette Coleman energy. (Nobody came, I've always naively assumed; only now does it occur to me that Sasha probably went home and masturbated, a skill I didn't acquire until I'd been with a woman.) I'd read Norman Mailer's "The Time of Her Time," and James Baldwin's *Another Country*, and knew that orgasms were considered significant, but all the tricky metaphors couldn't explain why if you'd never experienced or even witnessed one.

What I cared about was the thing itself: desire. I was quickly learning everything about it, though still ignorant of "sex," with its "technique" and "satisfaction." To me, these official skills and benefits were purely secondary. What mattered was that it seemed as if the attachment that Buddhist teachers exhort us to overcome, that we live in banal fragments every day, had been gathered and distilled and rendered down to its essence, as the stigma of the crocus is rendered to make saffron, or electromagnetic radiation is focused by a laser. Only wanting the wanter mattered.

I still feel this way sometimes.

Of course it was uneven, like anything in life. We were clumsy, and clumsier because we tried to act proficient. I worried about producing proper feminine responses, avoiding anything unwomanly. Precisely what classified as womanly behavior had become a serious puzzle at that volatile moment (so different from today?) when women were being exhorted to express sexual feelings without becoming too demanding, too threatening to men. We believed quite solemnly in something called "frigidity," preferring not to notice how the ancient legend of the omnivorous vagina lurked in its shadow.

Sasha had to be the teacher. We both expected it.

The first time he opened his jeans and made me touch his yearning cock, I felt a flicker of surprise to think he'd want to demonstrate the workings of such a bizarre apparatus. My ambivalence had less to do with my personal relation to its peculiar bulk than with the unsettling thought that half the human race must be similarly burdened.

Of course I was terrified of pregnancy, a disaster so total I couldn't envision it concretely. My life would be over, I'd have to have the baby. People say that adolescents believe themselves invulnerable, but it definitely wasn't true in my case. I agreed with my timid parents that life was dangerous; we just differed drastically as to

what to do about it. It didn't help that I'd lost my purchase on the future (as usual, Bob Dylan had the words for it: *your gravity fails / And negativity don't pull you through*). A year or two ago I'd burned to accomplish great things. Now I couldn't think of anything worth doing.

I despaired of equaling the bravery of men, who scored the dope, drove the vehicles, hitched up and down the coast, heard from their draft boards the minute they turned eighteen. By now I knew there were some interesting girls, like Sasha's friend Naomi of the memorable hair, who had met Allen Ginsberg. She'd recently been busted, sent away to live in Tucson. I suspected Sasha of being a bit in love with her, and I couldn't blame him. I myself thought her beautiful. Tending characteristically to eroticize my rivals, I wrote wistful poems about her, and about another girl I thought he favored.

Then there was Annie Monk, who was Ned Terwilliger's girl-friend. Ned was from Vancouver, one of Sasha's best buddies, so Annie and I frequently found ourselves making out in adjacent sleeping bags. Annie had a girlfriend named Cordelia; I'd heard them making plans to move to Salt Spring Island, way up in the Canadian San Juans—away from all the bullshit, Annie said. I didn't know how to talk to such independent girls, or why they'd want to bother with me.

I tried to match the boys *toke for toke* (though too much marijuana tended to make me paranoid), swallowed my jealousy of Sasha's other women, shut up about my fear the times we didn't use a condom.

There was no HIV. *There was no HIV.* There was no HIV.

The fact that it took about a year of energetic lust for us to arrive at the point of needing contraception had as much to do with Sasha's uncertainty about sexual mechanics as with my own nervousness. We engaged in a complex, largely tacit negotiation: of course I burned to do this famous thing, yet was in mortal fear of it. In any event, I was supposed to hang back. We required the excuse of Sasha's urgency.

On a few occasions he tried and couldn't find the opening (or so it seemed to me, scared and embarrassed as I was, and with only the sketchiest idea of what was supposed to happen). Once he blamed the problem on his being high on speed. Eventually, he brought up the theory that I might have been constructed at some peculiar angle. This was cruel—I half believed him—and not unprecedented. Too often I took the weight of his bad feeling, as when he joked about inviting Ned Terwilliger to screw me: "It would do you good, and I'm not up to it."

A poem I wrote at this time spells out what I clearly viewed as the tragic contradiction between enjoying sex with men and being effective in the world. Entitled "The Heart and Stomach of a King," it is premised on the notion that the virgin queen, Elizabeth I, must have been "a lover of women" because "once having blessed the ruler above her" (I meant to invoke what I took to be the usual response to heterosexual satisfaction), she would have been unfitted to perform her own acts of rule.

Some time after losing my own virginity (it seems so much more a process than a single act, but in any event, it was eventually accomplished), I found out that being on

top enhanced my pleasure markedly.

I had my first orgasm in the choir loft of Lake Forest Park Unitarian Church, on the northern outskirts of Seattle. I'd just turned seventeen and was about to graduate from high school. As so often happened in those days, we were making love in company—paired monogamously enough, yet plunged into the atmosphere of an orgy. It was the second night of a Fed conference. Sasha and I were in a sleeping bag, Terwilliger and Annie next to us. Sasha had come once already that night and now entered me as I lay on my stomach. He reached his hand underneath and massaged between my legs, moving dreamily, in no hurry.

At first I was only going along with it. Then, suddenly, I was *there*.

"Did you come?" he whispered, after, "or only come close?"

I knew it was an ambition of his for this to happen before I left for college. I'd been telling him it didn't really matter, that I enjoyed the things we did anyway. "I came," I said. It was somehow a very private moment. I felt gratitude, but not to Sasha, exactly. I experienced no sensation of defeat, as I'd supposed the queen would do. Quite possibly I'd modeled her reactions on those of Mailer's militant Denise Gondelman when bested in bed by the wily narrator of "The Time of Her Time."

My journals offer abundant evidence of my precocious obsession with sexual authenticity. An entry I wrote soon after joining LRY, inspired by a fleeting crush on Reverend Fava, who counseled me on my problems with my parents and dropped hints about my resemblance to an old girlfriend of his, reflects the concern that my sexual thoughts might have been a figment of my desire to be desired: "it is one thing to fancy oneself in love, which is more or less common to all adolescents, and another to be so bookish that one cannot even have sexual desires, but must fabricate them and pretend they are real. (I know perfectly well I have read enough Freud and Jung to be capable of doing this.)" Later on, as I explored my attractions to women, the concern that these desires might be a mere effect of reading would recur in strikingly similar terms.

Neither at age fifteen nor for many years after did it occur to me to question this division between the supposedly real, legitimate impulses, the pure desires, so to speak, and the presumed impurity of overheated imaginings. I swallowed whole a dubious distinction that seems like common sense because it's so ubiquitous, so widely reinforced by the paradoxical habit of turning to cultural authorities (elite and vulgar authors, self-help gurus, pornographers, members of the clergy, psychoanalysts, scientists) to explain what "real" desires *ought* to be. We persist in efforts to square the circle of sex, not merely configuring actions to some ephemeral ideal, but hoping to experience this convergence as the truth of our deepest nature.

The assumption of a split between some deep truth of sex and mere appearances affects men just as much as women. It is implicated, for instance, in the sorry history of efforts to fix an unambiguous border between the so-called normal and abnormal, between hetero- and homosexuality. (Thus Mailer's "hero" Denise retaliates by informing her hostile lover that his relentless cocksmanhood is nothing more than a desperate effort to "run away from the homosexual that is you," a not implausible supposition if the truth of sex is a hidden truth.)

Yet the assumption that sexual appearances deceive remains crucially inflected by gender. My fifteen-year-old's anxiety about the degree to which I might be swayed by the desire to be desired is implicitly a question about a *feminine* sexuality. I am worrying that I'll simply turn out to be a typical woman of my class and period, my feelings an effect of what other people want. I'm afraid I can't distinguish between men's lust and my own. I am hoping against hope that I'll learn to negotiate the treacherous terrain between object and subject. In my own view, I risk being doubly inauthentic, swayed to "unreal" sexual feeling both by suitors and by books, the latter possibly a special shame for a woman, whom intellect renders freakish under the best of circumstances.

In recent years I've speculated that the chronic misery of my high school and college years stemmed partly from my unconscious resistance to becoming a woman on the terms available to me, terms that contradicted my prior vision of myself as independent and competent. Rereading my journals, I've confirmed this view in all but one crucial aspect: there was no anesthetic to ease this rite of passage. The shock, the struggle, were completely conscious.

From an entry written on Christmas Day 1965, a week after Sasha tried to kiss me:

Right now I'm reading *African Genesis*, one of my presents. It has given rise to some terribly gloomy reflections. Before I thought "woman's role" was conditioned; now it turns out to be even worse—instinctual. That's awful, but the worst thing is that I sense it in myself. It's an awful, horrible trap. I'm going to grow up to have a husband and brats. Oh God, now I know how right I was when I said women are whores. "Sexual specialists"; but what I can't understand is: why did the man's specialization (territoriality) get involved with art and science and philosophy and women got left as what they are? Maybe George [Fava] has an answer—he's read the book.

Oh, it's so awful to feel cut off from the human race, or the only part that matters. It's not just an idea I got from a book; I've felt it before, and the book brought the feeling back. To think that when two males are together (pick the obvious examples, George and Sasha) they think, here's someone I can *communicate* with (remember Sasha's first letter—" . . . For the pure joy of talking and shooting the breeze I prefer boys so far, cause they are more kindred souls and still retain the soul of their sex" (I'm not quite sure what "retain the soul of their sex" means)). And when they talk to me, they think, oh here's a whore. This is *not* to implicate men in any way; why shouldn't they recognize us for what we are. Why does that sex have to be wasted on so many worthless boys? God, I love myself, and I am *the* individual . . . so why must I now have the bad luck, the underdog's role. I can't stand that position.

Remember in *On the Road* when Dean Moriarty and [Carlo Marx] have intense long conversations and reveal everything? I thought that was magnificent. With whom could I imagine myself doing such a thing? To be sure, not a woman. It would have to be a lover. But notice

that in Kerouac it's always the men exclusively who have the relationships. Some of them are homosexuals (I would be too, in those circumstances—they're the only ones who love in those books), the rest content themselves with brothels and cheap affairs. (T.E. Lawrence explained Arab homosexuality by saying that the women were nothing, only with a man could there be a "spiritual" as well as physical relationship.) So I'll never have that, what I want . . .

Both the reader and I are a universe away from this very young writer, who feels so alone, whose self-loathing is so stark, who automatically turns to men and books written by them for help in her predicament, as in a horror story where the fleeing, bloodied victim makes a beeline for the killer's door. My tour through her old-fashioned gender isolation illustrates a precept central to my adult life: certain problems simply have no individual solutions, can be addressed only when people act politically. There is much that the U.S. women's movement didn't cure, much that it hasn't even tackled—so many kids still drowning, "cut off from the human race." But for me, for the despairing, furtively hopeful child I was, it did come in time.

When I wrote that Christmas entry, my fate was sealed, and I knew it. Though I hadn't actually crossed the bodily Rubicon, I'd chosen: I wasn't to be a virgin queen. That very knowledge accounts for the force of my lament, whose pessimism is entirely characteristic.

Yet I soldiered on, and that, too, is typical. Bent on a course that I feared would ruin me, I still felt partly like my sturdy presexual self, the girl whose brain was her fortune, who could be anything. Valiantly I worked my intellect and pen, trying to solve the problem of being a woman.

FOUR

Proverbs of Hell

We have the experience of an I not in the sense of an absolute subjectivity, but indivisibly demolished and remade by the course of time. The unity of either the subject or the object is not a real unity, but a presumptive unity on the horizon of experience.

—**Maurice Merleau-Ponty**, *The Phenomenology of Perception*

I BROKE UP WITH Sasha by long-distance telephone at the start of my sophomore year at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. Throughout my freshman year, while he remained in Bellevue working at a boring job and dealing dope on a modest scale, we'd thought of ourselves as slouching toward matrimony. All the same, I'd obtained from my "dorm mommy"—the older student charged with riding herd on the inmates of my picturesque, ivy-covered residence hall—the name of a gynecologist who would prescribe the Pill, my first reliable contraception. I told myself that it would come in handy when Sasha and I got together over breaks.

Despite my virtuous plans, I soon began to experiment, in ways encouraged by the mores prevalent in my new surroundings. I never got the hang of recreational fucking—just the social maneuvering surrounding it left me feeling invisibly bruised—but I kept hoping to. I considered that it was my right. If men could *get their rocks off*, why couldn't I? Thus began a time in my life when sex began to seem like a major way to know the world, to take it in, consume it. (Meanwhile, I would begin keeping a notebook in which I repeatedly copied a caveat from William Blake: "If less than All cannot satisfy Man, More! More! is the cry of a mistaken soul.") So there was Noah, a freshman who hardly ever spoke, but beamed mystically on all and sundry. There was John, a skinny poet, old to still be in college, who talked about my body with a critic's eye for detail, noting the unusual length of my pubic hair, the buoyancy of breasts pumped up by synthetic hormones. And there was Wes, whose bedside copy of *Sex and Racism in America* posed a challenge he preferred to leave unspoken, late at night and drunk after a Black Student Union party.

Between my guilt about Sasha and my acute self-consciousness, these transactions were tense and pleasureless for me, yet they seemed like accomplishments. Having slept with one boy, I'd still felt almost virgin. Now that I'd put several casual

bedmates between myself and innocence, I could answer a bolder *yes* to Jimi Hendrix's famous query: "But first, are you experienced?"

Summer took me home to Bellevue, confession and reconciliation. Sasha I recall as bitter but resigned; quite possibly he himself had "fooled around." At work he'd made a new fringie friend—a hippie in updated parlance. Sasha and I and Billy and Billy's wife went camping in the Cascades, dropped acid in an alpine meadow near the tree line, watched geometric patterns form and gently undulate against volcanic rock. I remember driving to Billy's house, a pretty hovel in the country somewhere down near Mount Rainier, overrun with wild grasses and blackberry vines, with a small dark rapid river bordering the property in back, and wanting to have sex, and prodding Sasha to inquire if we could use the bedroom, and feeling afterward, though nothing was said, that I'd behaved indelicately, that a woman needs be careful how she displays her appetites.

I see us talking in his mother's kitchen. His parents were away, we had the house to ourselves, we'd smoked a joint and now were fixing something to eat. Or I was fixing it. He was talking about our future: "When we're married, you'll be at the sink washing dishes, wearing a skirt, no underwear. I'll come up and take you from behind." Did this strike him as a romantic thing to say? I accepted it as a teasing compliment, but felt queasy underneath. So far, my education hadn't proposed much in the way of an alternative to the career of sexy domesticity that he fantasized for me.

Not until I was back at school and being noticed by a junior named Ansel Geertz, a sociology major and frequenter of the upscale psychedelic scene, did I acknowledge how badly I wanted to cut my tie to Sasha. For some reason, now that I was out in the world (if, indeed, cloistered Reed could be counted as the world), our attachment felt confining in a way it never had when I'd been stuck in my cul-de-sac while he went off on beat adventures.

The fact was that Sasha and I, despite our common disaffection, had never really been on the same trajectory. The first two years I'd known him had been a pretty good time for him. He was living at home, had "wheels," as he put it, didn't have to have a job. He numbered among his friends the cream of teen bohemia from Vancouver, B.C., down to Tacoma and points south.

And he had me. Don't think I haven't thought of that. I was intelligent and loyal and pliable to a point, but that's only half the story.

I was drawn to his unhappiness, the irrevocable disappointment that he masked with his trademark sneer and an elliptical speaking style in which immaculate cool met incipient paranoia. It was because of that chance to minister to him (I would put my mouth to the wound, fearlessly, and draw out the poison) that I achieved the intimacy I'd dreamed of.

With certain lovers, the most important ones, I've felt a kind of scary expertise, a sense of meeting needs in the way some chemicals do, snapping into receptors awaiting them in the brain. I've enjoyed a secret, unseemly confidence that I can do this better than anyone else they'll ever find. And I've known the leeching guilt of breaking the promise—*only you*—contained in that communion, and thinking afterward, when my ministrations have healed nothing, that sucking wounds is the work of vampires, not angels of mercy.

Sometime in the early eighties, Leslie and I saw *The Hunger*. It features a beauty named Miriam (played by Catherine Deneuve) who turns out to be a serial lover in vampire's clothing. Part of her seduction is the promise that her partners will be immortal; in fact they do live a long time by human standards, but eventually succumb to accelerated aging and are stowed away in coffins in her attic, while Miriam carries on with her latest conquest. She visits the remains from time to time (they're not exactly dead, just in zombielike bad shape) and scatters vague endearments. At last they rise and advance horribly upon her, like proletarians uniting to smite the class enemy.

Instantly, I saw myself in Miriam. And I've never forgotten. That silly movie stuck with me as an apt metaphor for something sinister in my practice of passion. Exaggerated, yes, yet somehow recognizable.

But it's never simple damage that attracts me in the first place. With my first love, I had felt an erotic tug in the direction of social ascent, for in LRY's little circle of fringe wannabes, being Sasha Grant's girlfriend was the near equivalent of dating the class president or being pinned by the star quarterback.

After we graduated, Sasha must indeed have felt like the high school athlete whose triumphs are behind him. He'd contrived to flunk his draft physical, via one of those recipes that male adolescents used to trade in the manner of young women exchanging helpful hints on how to provoke a miscarriage. You starved yourself to the point of collapse, then drank gallons of coffee, something like that. For good measure, he admitted to homosexual tendencies. It worked, and he could count himself lucky, his future out from under the cloud of death or exile that fiercely shadowed even middle-class young men (not the group, by and large, that would fill the body bags) through those years of grinding slaughter. But he didn't seem to be in a celebratory mood. However unenthusiastic he was about further schooling, I knew he envied my admission to a famous "hippie college"—Reed's image in our circle, despite its stuffy curriculum. Ever since we'd been together he'd been telling me, with the mixed emotions sometimes displayed by uneducated parents toward college-bound children, that I, with my good grades, had a future to consider, and mustn't blow it on a ne'er-do-well like him.

I read such comments as an oblique reproach: as usual, my intellect was a gender problem. Sasha was hinting that if I really cared for him, I wouldn't show him up by exercising my flair for the life of the mind, a life he regarded with a painful mixture of yearning and resentment. My old notion that our bargain of romantic sex would allow me to go where the boys went had turned out to have an alarming flip side: Sasha's woman shouldn't venture where he couldn't, or wouldn't.

His was a subtle appeal, pitched to a frequency to which my feminine training had rendered me keenly sensitive. Ignoring it felt brutal, for I knew he was in trouble. I'd watched him, in a rage, injure himself "by accident"; I'd heard him insist, alarming even his gruff dad, that he liked to do nothing, he liked to think of nothing. So when he grudgingly enrolled in an obscure Midwestern college, I felt relief, diluted with a touch of jealousy at the thought that he'd have a whole new world I wouldn't know.

I couldn't acknowledge the fact that I'd outgrown him. I couldn't bear the wave of pity that washed over me at the thought of our no longer being together. It felt like the murder of innocence, not merely the end of an affair. In a symbolic transformation

I've begun to analyze only many years later, now that the pattern has surfaced in other relationships, the prospect of our ceasing to be Jan-and-Sasha had come to stand for a range of losses, might-have-beens, and nevermores—the aching fact of loss itself.

I headed back to Reed with our understanding intact. Sasha planned to drive to school in Ohio via the northern route, through the Canadian Rockies, but got arrested at the border when an inspection of his car turned up his stash of marijuana in the trunk.

At Reed I'd instantly reverted to playing at being single, allowing Ansel Geertz to pay me flattering attention. I knew I should discourage him, but kept postponing it. Then I heard that Sasha had been busted.

I can't recall our breakup conversation—not what was said, not by how far it followed my receipt of the news of his legal mishap (alarming precisely because it sounded so avoidable), nor the state of my understanding with Ansel at that point. I only remember standing in the hallway, holding the receiver of the dorm's pay telephone and recognizing the corrupt power of distance, the simplicity of ending it all from here, from where Sasha couldn't get to me. Of course I knew he needed me more than ever. I determined to ignore him, to be cruel.

Very soon I was distracted from the guilt by the misery of my unsuccessful affair with Ansel. Over time I would be haunted. "Those nightmares about Sasha worry me," I noted the following summer. "They reveal to me what it is that I can't stand in him, in the idea of him—that is the cringing, the supplication. I don't think he is really this way, in fact—but somehow I continue to fear that he will clutch at me with horrible fingers as he goes down for the third time. Why should I think he is drowning?"

My sexual forays in the Reed years were largely disastrous, but at this remove, the specific boorishness of the half dozen men I slept with seems almost incidental. More salient in terms of my problem being a woman was my unhappy relationship to the school itself, a connection shot through with gender worries that I had no language for.

Reed, which had been founded just over half a century before my arrival in the fall of 1967, had been imagined as an oasis of intellectual excellence in the landscape of relentless practical activity that characterized the Northwest in its post-frontier period. It boasted lofty admissions standards and an ambiguous reputation as the home of a sort of egghead, offbeat aristocracy. In Seattle or Portland, to say one had been to Reed was to lay claim to formidable cultural capital, but also to risk being seen as a little weird. The place cranked out record numbers of Rhodes scholars, maintained a challenging senior thesis requirement at a time when such a policy was unusual, and, by way of stressing knowledge for knowledge's sake, issued letter grades but kept them secret from the students. There were no fraternities, and sports were a joke; supposedly, students had once devised a cheer: "Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky / We've got a team that's really hotsky!"

Thanks to the nonconformist spirit such legends celebrated, and to having harbored some counterculture heroes like Gary Snyder back in the Beat era, Reed had garnered a mostly undeserved reputation as a hotbed of radicalism. Students wore rags and patches, stayed stoned for months on end, scrounged leftover food in

Commons, dwelled in cheerful off-campus filth—but the faculty clung to (nay, plumed itself upon) an extremely traditional Eurocentric curriculum, at whose core was a two-year humanities requirement, heavy on the ancient Greeks, ingested amid the glories of Tudor Gothic architecture. Tuition was high, insularity off the charts. Cynics tried to puncture Reed's pretensions by referring to it as "the finest small liberal arts college in Eastmoreland," the manicured Southeast Portland neighborhood that surrounded our bosky campus.

My seasons at Reed weighed on me with a peculiar mix of aimlessness and pressure, loneliness and maddening lack of privacy. I was always dodging tedious roommates, always bored yet overworked. There was rarely a moment when I didn't feel I should be studying or working on a paper. It rained incessantly, I had no means of escaping from campus (unless I bummed a ride, and I hated asking favors; in any event, I had nowhere to go), I was forever smoking the same depressing cigarettes, listening to Janis Joplin or Cream blasting out of a neighboring dorm room while crawling through pages of Plato or Saint Augustine, marking time until five p.m. when Commons began serving dinner. I can remember sitting in the chapel, where movies were shown on weekends, and thinking a wordless, anxious, totally unexpected thought: *I am lost, I have no lover*. It was the fear of not existing.

I suffered in those years from a refugee mentality. I'd gotten out of Bellevue, which should have meant something, but even as it spread out before me all the riches of Western civ, Reed seemed appallingly self-referential. It offered me nothing I could see how to use. And that, I think now, was not merely because the course of study lacked what we would shortly come to know as "relevance," but because I had no inkling who to be when I got out. My future was a terror.

How to make vivid an obsolete emotion, arriving like tardy light from a fizzled star? After all that's been done and said in thirty years of feminism, I find myself still rawly furious at the memory of having been seduced and abandoned by the elite institution entrusted with my mind. My anger is all the sharper because I usually repress it, ashamed to whine from the place of privilege that allowed me to end up at a fancy school like Reed. But this is one of those cases in which damage and luck are one. Here is one thing that privilege can mean: to be convinced of your inclusion, offered unceasing proofs of it, while all the while, invisibly, an efficient little worm is shearing away the root hairs of your being.

Despite the world's insistence that I "could be anything," I did not feel like a welcome guest at the civilizational banquet. My sense of exclusion had everything to do with the body my mind lived in (my gender, as James Baldwin once said of his race, had inexcusably "failed to produce Rembrandt"), as well as, subtly, with class and geography. I came of folks too recently up from the toiling masses to take (or pretend to take) high culture for granted. And I was a Northwest native, while many of my fellow Reedies hailed from the heart of empire.

At last I chose philosophy for a major, in part because I always wanted to get to the core of things, and hoped eventually to grasp some unassailable fact, some constant source of all our fickle knowledge, ignorance of which I thought must be to blame for my nagging sense of insecurity; in part to avoid the easy way out, the frilly, feminine field of literature. In three years I never had a woman professor for an academic subject (not that there were any in literature, either). The one healthily self-

protective thing I did was to avoid writing classes, even though I'd been saying quietly for years that I might like to be a writer. I knew I'd be a failure at the public relations, unable to project a writerly persona the way all the leather-clad boy poets did. I composed private poems and fragmentary stories, and stayed up all night on speed writing well-received essays on Aristotle's theory of action, on causation in Hume.

The woman I was to be would clearly have to be invented. If I could scarcely imagine her mental and economic life, at least I was sure that she would be sexual—but how? With whom? This, too, was up for grabs.

My sexual identity was changing, as the earnest young woman who signaled her defiance through passionate trysts with one rebel boy shaded into a libertine-in-training, committed, though not consistently so, to detaching bodily pleasure from emotion. This shift was in part a response to the ideology of the times (the Jacobins of the sexual revolution were gleefully busy smashing monogamy), but also in part to my perception that the association between desire and love presented an especial danger to a woman.

With Sasha, I'd come too close to being a wife, in thrall to a man's needs. If I'd resisted, had not been properly compliant, I'd nevertheless been perilously attuned to his wants and expectations. The "cringing and supplication" were more dangerous to me than his casual nastiness, his neglect or arrogance. The pressures that went with my insight into his despair felt like the price I'd paid for getting so close, for the intensity of our sex. Could I arrange to feel the thrill without the thralldom?

As with every other goal I set myself, I looked to men to set the standard. Most men, I realized, were not handicapped by my really rather silly difficulty in uncoupling simple lust from a swarm of considerations encompassing my worldview, aesthetics, morals, politics, and aspirations for the future. Most men, in other words, were not in bondage, as was I, to the senseless precept that you shouldn't fuck where you weren't prepared to marry.

In truth, I had one foot in my parents' world, which was formed in an age when the life consequences of women's sexual choices infused the rule with sturdy material logic. For my grandmothers, the selection of a husband—presumably the first and only sexual partner—had amounted to the choice of a lifetime occupation. The same could fairly be said of my mother, who had a bachelor's degree in home economics and who had never since my birth held a paying job, though she would later teach English as a second language.

Easier access to contraceptives had helped my generation of women disengage the idea of sex from that of ultimate destiny, but I'd still come along early enough to know the dread of pregnancy before legalized abortion. (And birth control itself was of course highly imperfect: I tried the Pill, a diaphragm, and at last a Dalkon Shield, which I luckily survived with my uterus intact.) Although I was presumably going to become self-supporting very soon, I was terribly vague about the whole business. And no wonder. I knew no women who paid their own way, apart from a few librarians and teachers and Grandma Nell, my father's stepmother, whose stories of toil in factories and sweatshops seemed like something out of Dickens.

You are whom you sleep with. The proposition was not gender-neutral; as a corollary to the tacit premise that *women's* sex was especially central to our identities, it tightly bound me and let the boys go free. It animated my parents' ideal of lifelong marriage, which set a standard of self-consistency that I was to flout but never entirely elude, thereby becoming an emotional modernist, dwelling in fragments yet nostalgically attached to an image of organic unity. No wonder that my turn toward women would implicitly propose: *If I have to be a wife, then at least I want a wife.*

Ansel Geertz turned out to be a spoiled poseur with limited interest in sex whose image depended on his late-model car and a string of metaphysical insights, like cheap glass trading beads, picked up on psychedelic and amphetamine excursions. He impressed me with his talk of Jungian principles, his pursuit of ultimate meaning. He ferried me, tripping, in the middle of the night to all the places the coolest Reedies frequented: Hung Far Low's for pork fried rice, the airport coffee shop for sundaes. He called me kiddo and lectured me, coldly, on my spiritual development, a fatal flaw in which he diagnosed very shortly after I moved in with him.

I was scorched by guilt over Sasha, and this rejection was agonizing. I had the choice of accepting Ansel's view of my shortcomings or admitting what a sucker I'd been. I felt plundered emotionally, reinforced in my fear that intimacy meant bending my perceptions and desires to a man's requirements.

Art Kane was kind, depressed, asexual. Mourning a girlfriend who'd left him years ago, he lived with a state-of-the-art sound system and his cat, S. Mack, on the ground floor of a house with gingerbread trim and sagging porches, a few blocks from campus. He was in his mid-twenties and had supposedly made big money dealing dope in the Bay Area. I knew I wasn't in love and hoped that meant progress.

I was slowly beginning to have a few friendships with women, but I didn't work hard to cultivate them. It didn't occur to me that I should have to work; now I see that my early isolation meant I had arrived in my late teens with serious gaps in my social skills. I wasn't sure why women would want to know me, and while it began to dawn on me that they could be quite interesting, I persisted in viewing them as optional. I knew the ones it was easiest to know, observing others from a distance.

In freshman year I saw a good deal of Lynne Jasper, a Seattleite I'd met in LRY. Lynne surrounded herself with a dense, eclectic crowd, including her roommate, Norah, who hailed from Oakland, and Norah's Black Student Union buddies. Blacks were a tiny minority at Reed, but there were more as the sixties ended than there'd been a few years back, or would be again by the late seventies. They hung together, of necessity; as a group they were militant, but hardly separatist, despite the heady influence of Black Power.

It was my first experience with an interracial scene, as opposed to what I knew of "integration," which in Bellevue meant *one* (not very frequently), with all the bad faith and suppressed hysteria inherent in such arrangements. (The delicate tasks of not seeing difference and of forgetting history—"Just treat him the way you'd treat anybody else"—were the core of this program.) I was attracted by Norah's set, but careful not to seem impressed. I was petrified that I'd somehow let slip how badly screwed up I'd been by my thorough indoctrination in the unspoken and unspeakable principle that Others exist so that We may demonstrate Our lack of prejudice. I

certainly couldn't be playfully irreverent like Lynne, who proposed to test on her thick Caucasian hair the effect of the curlers required by light-skinned Norah to impart plausible density and shape to a too relaxed natural. I'd eat with their entourage in Commons (it was bad form to eat alone); I'd visit their dorm room late at night, sit stoned while Aretha blasted at top volume, but it wasn't intimate, not a one-on-one friendship.

At the start of junior year I got close to Alexa Abrams. She was as smart as a sleek machine, really into sex with men, and much more socially adept than I. I was pleased and slightly bewildered when she sought me out, inviting me for dinner. She cooked efficiently (she did everything efficiently) on a hot plate in her dorm room: vegetarian goulash, chicken curry with peanut butter. She'd brew a pot of tea, put on a record by the Kinks, pick flecks of stray tobacco off her teeth as we smoked and talked about parents, men, ideas.

I was nineteen, she was my first important female friend, and I felt amazed that anyone who projected such self-assurance would bother with a wallflower like myself. Her husky voice, the assertive temperament that so many men found threatening, her perceptiveness about the workings of our social world, the amazing fact that she worried about keeping her weight *up*—all were becoming romantic for me. I savored her wry descriptions of the grubby pool-playing set who spent all their waking hours at the tables in Lower Commons and her insight into the circle orbiting Bill Crabbe, a flamboyant thirtyish professor. Crabbe dressed like Dennis Hopper in *Easy Rider*; talked like William Blake on downers, supposedly screwed his students of both sexes, and had made the ossified humanities curriculum (Herodotus! Plato! Dante!) improbably popular.

Alexa was adventurous without the self-destructive streak so prominent in many rebel girls I knew. Though often hurt by her musician lover, Danny, a feckless, inconstant charmer, she was bound and determined not to bleed for long. I marveled at her focus, her ability to descry a future that loomed so blurrily in my field of vision. She planned to graduate with a teaching credential, a practical supplement to her liberal arts degree. She was a winner. I loved to watch her work.

By the end of September, I was writing in my journal: "Alexa is the reason why I wake up in the morning feeling like I've got a steady and reliable lover. In the past three weeks she has become to me what a lover ought to be; I feel closer to her than anyone else. We are alike. We understand one another." I fully intended the sexual implication, for I added, "I don't know, I don't know and I just don't know what I want at all. Do I have too many theories in my head from reading Colette?" I'd been perusing an anthology of her writings that included juicy excerpts from *Le Pur et l'impur*, and as usual was worried that nascent desires might prove to be merely a species of emotional plagiarism.

At precisely this time I began a long-distance affair with Ned Cusumano, a gregarious twenty-seven-year-old hip capitalist and the former dope-dealing partner of the melancholy Art Kane. Ned lived in San Francisco, where he ran a small business that supplied head shops with the staples of their trade. He was a brazen chauvinist, but I thought that needn't touch me. My excursions to the cradle of hippiedom offered glad escape from rainy Reed. I savored stolen weekends where the living looked easy, where you zipped over sun-warmed, fog-cooled hills on the back

of a motorcycle, where days began with the *Book of Changes* and a joint, where couples called each other “my old lady” and “my old man” and “vibes” were material forces. I had not yet learned to manage my writer’s consciousness, to distinguish clearly between wanting to live a life and simply wanting to observe it.

Being with Ned was less an exclusive coupling of the sort I’d pursued with Sasha and Ansel than an emotional triangle, with Alexa at its vertex. Ned played right along, denouncing Alexa’s unfeminine demeanor, pressuring me to shun her influence. In effect, without needing to utter the word, he warned me against perversion, which he alluded to with some Friscobabble label like “lending energy to negative areas.”

My life became, for a month or two that fall, a tale that reads like the perils of Persephone. I was dramatically divided in my allegiance to male and female principles—although, in Ned’s version of gender symbolism, the terms were reversed, the male principle constituting the link to a sunny realm of natural bounty, the female beckoning me to a sinister underworld. In my journal I admonished myself to cultivate “the incredible deliciousness of relating to someone you like through differences rather than through samenesses,” to moderate the intensity of my feelings for Alexa by rationing our contact and seeing more of other girls. In effect, I was enmeshed in what the cultural critic Marjorie Garber, writing in *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, calls a “bisexual plot.” She defines such a plot as “a mode of erotic triangulation in which one person is torn between life with a man and life with a woman,” and notes that “often . . . the erotic tension is greatest when it is not acted upon”; in some instances, à la D.H. Lawrence’s *The Fox*, “it is the triangle that *produces* eroticism to begin with.”

According to the lesbian feminist perspective that I was shortly to embrace, my connection with Alexa should have been primary: in effect, she and I had the “real” relationship, potentially lesbian, potentially more fulfilling than anything to be hoped for with a man. That’s not the way I see it now, although I do think that my recognition of sexual feelings for her laid the groundwork for my more assertive handling of later lesbian attractions. I agree with Garber’s thesis that bisexual triangles can in themselves be a source of erotic energy—which, far from suggesting that my libidinal best interests lay in choosing Alexa over Ned, hints that I may unconsciously have relished my dilemma. Ned pointed the way to a mode of queer seduction exempt from the considerable risks of an open declaration.

The situation also illustrates, however, how one’s social environment can promote the subordination of inchoate desires to the requirements of congealed identities. The very fact that my world was so straight at this point made it unlikely that I would vigorously pursue my attraction to Alexa, less out of fear of unmasking a lesbian true self than because my feelings for her lacked the legitimizing context that tradition accorded to even my flimsiest heterosexual crushes. Had a similar situation arisen in a later decade when lesbian couples were much in evidence on liberal campuses, I might have been more direct with her. If not, my assessment of my own internal state might have more quickly alerted me to other lesbian attractions, for the evidence is clear that as I “discovered” women, I made no hard and fast distinction between admiration and desire.

The “incredible deliciousness” of my dalliance with Ned lost its savor soon enough. The sex was a big disappointment, for one thing, and though I tried to

rationalize his sporadic interest, I could guess that he wasn't exactly celibate when I was up in Portland. His male supremacist rhetoric was too much altogether. Years later, Alexa liked to reminisce about how he'd once admonished her, "If you don't learn to follow, you'll never have a man!"

Ned and I lapsed almost gently from each other's lives. "It's my fault that I let him talk me into eternal love so easily," I noted in my journal early in February 1970. "I *cannot understand* how it is that I can be so opposite. I am inwardly independent and outwardly so compliant. I want a man to master me, and yet inside I don't much agree with most of their opinions." I didn't think to invoke William Blake, whose "Proverbs of Hell" I so admired around this time: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Embracing male chauvinism at such a pitch of caricature had forever soured me on self-proclaimed manly men.

Sternly focused on the need for self-reliance, I read *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* by the Japanese haiku master Bashō and took long rainy walks in the early Portland spring. I was steeling myself to kick college cold turkey.

It seemed crucial to leave Reed without earning a degree. I'd tried to drop out before, but had been dissuaded by my parents, and by what I deemed my own cowardice in being overly concerned with how I would make a living, not to mention how I'd structure my life outside the womb of campus and the academic calendar. Now I was getting braver, less resigned to my desperation. I was writing more, revising, even showing poems to others—an exposure that required much the same charade of toughness as having sex with men I didn't trust. I struggled to reconcile art and academics. For so long my existence had focused on school, had run along a track laid down by others' expectations, that I began to think if I didn't get out fast, I'd never have a life to call my own.

Approaching my "junior quals," examinations required to proceed with my major, I worried that no thinker I'd studied had offered solid answers to the fundamental questions. My unease was stained with gender in ways invisible to me. I'd been exposed to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, so I knew there was some sense in even the most exalted quarters that the most basic forms of knowledge might be strangely mutable. Yet I still felt as though I must be lacking something, some male confidence, some affinity for proof. I knew my epistemological jitters wouldn't end with a B.A., and I had a horror of the limbo of graduate school, the only obvious sequel to a Reed philosophy degree.

If the problems of having a female intelligence were all the more daunting for being inarticulable (in part because there literally was no language for them—everyone knew that *mind* was a universal term, like *man*), then the same was true for the problems of having a female body. I tried to believe the premise I'd been raised on, and that parts of my Reed experience reinforced: for the modern generation to which I belonged, new technologies and enlightened attitudes had rendered physical difference obsolete. But the longer I stayed in college, the more entangled I became in bewildering contradictions, no-win situations that I was at a loss to analyze because I had as yet no access to the feminist concepts that were being hammered out in consciousness-raising groups and political collectives far from self-involved Reed.

For one thing, I was having eating problems. They had begun in high school, but grew worse when I left home. I would starve myself, then gorge, then be frantic about my weight (which I fortunately never thought of controlling by vomiting). This was before eating disorders came into vogue, and I had no sense that my alimentary roller coaster was anything other than a unique perversity. My flesh, my appetite, required unceasing management, an unspeakably trivial yet obsessive preoccupation that felt woefully unadult, unserious, degrading. Which is perhaps to say that it felt *womanish*—as did, indeed, the fact of excess poundage. Men floated above their bodies; women seemed to wallow in them. I felt, I have always felt, I continue to feel, that fat (my own—I'm more tolerant of others') is sexually unattractive; but worse than that, it's the external mark of a kind of hideous slackness, a spongy feminine physicality. I'm not anorexic, but I see very clearly how a self-destructive thinness can feel like vengeful power.

When I starved myself, I couldn't concentrate on studies. Binging was worse. When I ate more than enough and still couldn't stop, I felt grotesque, like a great-aunt on my mother's side whom the extended family viewed with circumspect horror as an example of what could happen when a woman "let herself go." My mother's maternal grandmother, a Minnesota farmer's wife who had borne eleven children, had also been huge (and, it was hinted, slatternly). They were women who somehow had become their bodies in a radical, helpless way that haunted the rest of us. My compulsion would not have caused me so much anguish had I been concerned solely for my physical appearance. I felt somehow existentially impaired, in danger of being trapped not merely by excess flesh, but within a loathsome self.

Meanwhile, as I strove to assert my dignity through a principled defiance of sexual convention, I kept coming up against the double standard. The injustice of it never ceased to gall me, and I'd been beside myself with naive indignation on hearing that a guy I'd slept with freshman year had reported I was "easy." "Easy!" I fumed. "No easier than *he* was!"

As a junior, post-Ned, I reflected in my journal, apropos of a brief encounter with a stoned boy I'd met at a campus dance, whose demand for "a passionate kiss" I'd prudently ignored: "this is actually what I want, or think I want: lots of more or less undifferentiated men. But with no complications." If my body were free to circulate in a gender-neutral erotic marketplace along with other free bodies—so went the logic supporting the appeal of the sexual revolution to young women like myself—I might thereby be liberated. If I could graduate from being a man's consumer object to exercising my own consumer options, I'd achieve equality.

Or should I make a virtue of necessity and celebrate my own consumption? As I floundered in the nets of gender paradox, I had once actually made an unsuccessful attempt to trade sex for money. At the end of my sophomore year, in need of a summer job, I decided to try to be a topless dancer. This line of work was almost a tradition at Reed. It was viewed as a pretty good gig for a girl because it paid twice as much as entry-level clerical work. But more than that, it was hip, a way of working the system, like getting food stamps or selling a lid here and there or dodging the opportunity to die horribly in defense of the murderous worldview of Lyndon Baines Johnson. If men were stupid enough to pay to look at your tits (to purchase your cooperation in their fantasy that you were no more than a pair of tits), why not take

advantage of it?

I tried out at lunchtime in a bar called the Bellroom, a nondescript, more than half empty joint in a neighborhood of decaying housing stock and the drabbest of industry. The coarse little middle-aged man who hired and bossed the dancers (he called himself an agent) received me in his office behind the Bellroom's narrow stage. He handed me my costume, a pair of frilly panties that had too clearly been pre-owned (were there pasties? I can't remember), looked me over wearily, and sent me out to do my thing.

The music came from a jukebox, and was repetitive; I remember dancing over and over to "The Age of Aquarius." I had to wear very high heels, which hurt a lot. The men at the tables looked like losers. I wasn't afraid of them, just embarrassed about not being very good. I thought it shouldn't matter, though: they were getting what they'd paid for, weren't they? Smallish breasts, slightly marred by a ribboning of stretch marks, but young bare bouncing breasts all the same.

The first session left me feeling discouraged. I imagined working nights, getting off in the small hours, waiting forever for an empty bus. I couldn't stop feeling nervous in the presence of the agent. I went back once more, then admitted I couldn't hack it. Fortunately my mother had insisted that I take the Civil Service exam, and I eventually got offered a summer file clerk job at the Veterans Administration. It was deadily dull, but I accepted gratefully.

You never know what is enough, wrote William Blake, unless you know what is more than enough. Anyone as ill at ease as I with the basic conventions of boy-girl interaction, whose idea of seduction was to write a well-crafted letter, who felt weirdly exposed by the contrivances of fashion, the masquerade of sex appeal, was unlikely to shine as an exotic dancer. Yet I had wanted to think I could pull it off. In part, my wish was in keeping with the spirit of an age in which all sexual scruples were supposed to be passé. But that very spirit linked up with a broader inclination to question both the solidity of "eternal human nature" and the coherence of individual character. If these were mirages, what *wasn't* possible?

Ironically, predictably, the mirages wouldn't budge. I had discovered limits beyond which it felt too risky and laborious to venture. My mind and my body (if in fact they were really twain) declined to cooperate in the seductive pantomime, elementary though it was, required at the Bellroom.

In the spring of 1970, my deepest interests apart from poetry revolved around questions about the consistency and continuity of the self. "I *cannot understand* how it is that I can be so opposite," I had written after breaking up with Ned. I meant inconsistent or contradictory, but the mistake itself is telling, as though "oppositeness" were a personal attribute and not a function of two people in relation. Now I copied out a passage from Henry Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn*: "She changed like a chameleon. Nobody could say what she was really like because with each one she was an entirely different person . . ." I was mulling over a new version of the problem I had noted four years earlier in connection with George Fava's flattering attentions: how could I tell the difference between my own desire and my satisfaction in arousing another's interest?

I evidently suspected that inconsistency might be a specifically female problem. But a broad unease about the unity or fragmentation of any self as it exists in time had also plagued me in those earlier journals, where I had worried that if I deferred the reading of books forbidden by my parents, the person who eventually got to read them would no longer be the “I” that right this minute burned to know what they contained. Now I seized on a passage from Gertrude Stein’s *What Are Masterpieces*: “The thing one gradually comes to find out is that one has no identity that is when one is in the act of doing anything. . . . I am I because my little dog knows me but, creatively speaking the little dog knowing that you are you and your recognising that he knows, that is what destroys creation.”

Of course, “identity,” in the who-am-I? sense, is a famous concern of adolescents, and I underwent my share of that sort of searching, but I also worried about even more troubling issues: was there ever really an “I” that could be said to be one thing or another? Was there something wrong with “me” if “I” could not achieve the consistency that my social world—that little dog—demanded? And if consistency were in fact illusory, then how was “I” to endure my solitude? If even the self is a flickering fiction, what becomes of self-reliance?

It’s intriguing to speculate why I focused at just this time on questions that almost eerily foreshadowed my later crisis of sexual identity. If my intermittent attractions to women were a factor, they were not yet a major one. I had as yet no developed thought of a permanent choice between the genders.

Precisely because I still could not imagine a world centered on anything other than what men wrote and did, the seeming anomaly of my “lesbian” interests preoccupied me less than what I saw as the bizarre eclecticism of my attractions to males. I had by now sampled enough partners to be uneasily acquainted with the temptation to shape-shifting described by Henry Miller. What had egotists like Ansel or Ned seen in me, anyway? Was it anything that could be said to be really there? What, for that matter, had *I* seen in them? In a sense, the alarm I felt when I ran down my list of lovers was a tangible expression of my panic at the pressure to invent my womanhood from scratch. “I” wasn’t a given. “I” felt too slippery. The vertigo implicit in the sentence “you can be anything” was hitting full force.

Yet I couldn’t be just anything—a topless dancer, for instance, or someone who enjoyed sex with strangers. The paradox I faced at eighteen or twenty was similar to that confronted by anyone today who wishes to debunk the myth of universal erotic predestination without encouraging homophobes’ tenacious wish to believe that *gay* people, given a little willpower, could cultivate straight desires.

The problem reduces to this: how to honor the flux while giving full weight to repetition and patterning. Lives move unpredictably, but not haphazardly. The self as it’s lived this side of Buddhist enlightenment is no mere superstition. But neither is it one and indivisible. Why is it so hard to hold on to this doubleness, especially when eros enters the picture? (For if, as I keep arguing, sexuality is not some precinct sealed off from the rest of life, then my horror of commonplace seductive routines, my emotional tilt toward monogamy, appear to be as much in need of explanation as someone else’s fixed attraction to one or the other gender.)

Curiously, my eventual success in dropping out of Reed (which entailed deliberately failing several classes) can be viewed either as an example of

inconsistency because it decisively besmirched my shining academic record, or alternatively as a teeth-gritting effort to carry through a predetermined course of action. Either way, it was yet another dramatic rupture, in line with my rejection of my parents' values and my abrupt break with Sasha. By the time I got around to changing sexual identities, I'd have plenty of practice in leaving old worlds for new ones.

My departure from Reed marked the end of my interest in "undifferentiated men." I also quit using most illegal substances; they were harder to come by off campus, and faded in appeal once I wasn't around people who were forever getting high. I vowed never to weigh myself and stuck to it for years. I did gain weight, but gradually resolved the worst of my eating problems.

Social issues were rapidly coming into focus. Not that I'd been completely oblivious before. I'd celebrated when LBJ declined to run for reelection, had tracked the Tet Offensive with Walter Cronkite in Lower Commons. When the BSU took over Eliot Hall, I'd cheered the demand for Black Studies from the sidelines. But working for change had seemed outside my sphere, and Reed had only encouraged my impression that thought and action wouldn't mix very well. Now I began to feel responsible for distant happenings.

It was all coming down: the Cambodian incursion, students murdered at Kent State and Jackson State. Even Reedies hit the streets, deserting placid Eastmoreland to march downtown with our counterparts from Portland State College. *One side's right, one side's wrong, victory to the Viet Cong*: I blanched at the simple-minded rhetoric, but plumped down on the asphalt and got myself arrested with a couple of freshman girls in combat jackets who were touchingly eager to make a radical statement.

Somewhere during those weeks of turmoil, I took the virginity of a lad named Josh Dahl. Scowling tenderly through wire-rimmed glasses, Josh was another of my soft-centered cynics. He cared passionately about environmental issues, and had hooked up with something called the Learning Community, a sort of anticollege recently begun by a bunch of disaffected Reed professors and students. Josh and I shared an attraction to alpine wilderness and Martin Heidegger's impenetrable thinking.

My final memory of Reed is of sunning on the lawn, Josh stretched shirtless beside me. I was mad for the shy heat of his toast-and-honey-colored body, but struggling to keep things in perspective. I meant to know the world and not to lose myself again. In my hand was a copy of a newsmagazine, open to an article on the My Lai massacre. In a day or two when the dormitories closed, I'd be flying with Alexa to her home in the Berkeley hills. Her parents were divorcing, her dad moving back east. She and I would be driving his car across the country.

FIVE

Ménage à *N*

*women women surround me
images of women their faces
I who for years pretended them away
pretended away their names their faces
myself what I am pretended it away*

—**Susan Sherman**, “Lilith of the Wildwood,
of the Fair Places”

LIKE MANY PEOPLE who profess disdain of daytime television and its print equivalents, I long ago became addicted to the intellectually correct soap opera served up in books about Virginia Woolf and friends. When I puzzle over Bloomsbury’s sexual intricacies, wondering how even such a madly creative bunch could concoct a plot in which a sheltered young woman ends up marrying a man who buggered her father before she was a gleam in either of their eyes, I have only to think of the Learning Community to recall my own season of metaphorical incest, of baroque erotic complications that seemed standard at the time.

I joined the Community after returning from my cross-country trip, which lasted only a few weeks but made a big impression on me. I felt as if I was jettisoning my cultural virginity, for it was my first sight of that eastern metroplex to which, despite our pose of preferring “God’s country,” the western provinces consistently deferred.

Life on the road with Alexa had been fun, but too easy, I thought, not a proper test of my self-sufficiency. Leaving her in Pittsburgh, I’d hopped a bus to New York and stayed with Lynne Jasper in her mother’s tiny walk-up on the volatile, heroin-ridden Lower East Side. Then I’d continued north to Maine and camped in Acadia National Park. Missing Josh and increasingly nervous about my isolation after a few days of hitchhiking around the park and sleeping alone in the open, I wrote in my journal that I’d been “proving my masculinity long enough.” I called my parents and accepted their offer to pay my plane fare to Minneapolis, where I endured a family reunion as the price of my safe conduct home.

When I arrived back in Portland, Josh and I resumed our wary-tender affair. He was then about to move into the Learning Community, and through him I got to know

a good deal about the new organization's objectives and makeup. By fall I'd decided it made sense for me to join.

The core group of refugees from Reed aimed at nothing less than reinventing higher education in a form far more egalitarian and "relevant" than anything a smug private liberal arts college was prepared to countenance. Though not exactly devoid of elite connections—it got a starter grant from the Carnegie Foundation—the Learning Community was anything but smug. Made brave or desperate by disillusionment with liberal tradition, its founders wrenched apart the familiar framework of their lives in the hope of building something better. Members—all white, many Jewish, some married and raising children—tried bravely to adjust to communal living in newly purchased houses in the mostly Black, lower-middle-class Irvington section of northeast Portland.

The idea was to combine self-directed study with socially useful work. Major projects included setting up a rural site complete with organic farming options, starting an experimental ("free") school, and transforming a dingy coffee shop in the run-down Burnside area into a funky café whose cheap prices and eclectic menu we hoped would appeal to skid row derelicts and counterculturalists alike. There were plans to obtain accreditation and offer undergraduate degrees, but for most of us the issue of formal credentialing was entirely secondary to that of relocating intellectual endeavor outside the ivory tower.

"We," I say, but I joined with reservations that I never entirely got rid of. For one thing, the Community seemed like Josh's project, and by now I had firmly in view the folly of supposing that my own aimlessness could be redeemed by joining a man in a life of his design. But a more important factor was my ambivalence about giving myself over to the process, the flow, the rhythms and preoccupations of a collection of people who spoke of themselves less as an organization than as an organic body. In the Learning Community, I glimpsed for the first time the positive potential of People in Groups, and with it the hope for an end to chronic dissatisfaction with my social surroundings. I responded to the vision of a creative whole that would reinforce the strengths of the parts. But I was used to seeing myself as a woman-island, and the prospect of immersion in an ocean of others felt deeply threatening. Perhaps I sensed, accurately, how dangerous groups can be—that they can amplify destructive dynamics as well as positive ones—but rather than credit the wisdom of my forebodings, I mostly reproached myself for my ("bourgeois") individualism. I thought my efforts to be a writer had something to do with my need for a solitude I feared was selfishly at odds with communal openness.

A similar tension would characterize my later relationships to communities of women. Both in the Learning Community and in lesbian feminist settings, part of the intensity involved the deliberate breakdown of the distinction between erotic and other forms of group connection. Imparting a local twist to the era's fascination with freeing libidinal impulses, Learning Community members tended to reinterpret lovemaking itself as a form of communalism, another way of moving beyond the isolating structures of monogamy, nuclear households, or the hip and heartless promiscuity that flourished at Reed. In an atmosphere in which we fondly imagined ourselves to be making *everything* new, taboos on both intergenerational and same gender attractions fell rapidly by the wayside. Polymorphous perversity began to look

like civic virtue.

Another salient feature of Community life, and a crucial one for me, was that here women exercised more power than in any other setting I'd experienced. Particularly after a series of sharp debates led to the departure of a faction who worried that we were becoming too inclusive and standardless, several older women (teacher types in their thirties) emerged as highly influential. Their leadership was informal, but so was most leadership in a group that increasingly equated explicit structure with odious hierarchy. I admired Glenda Tate, who'd taught economics at Reed. She seemed to regard Josh as a protégé, which meant we got invited to U-pick berries with her and made a soggy threesome on weekend backpacking trips. A lover of all things local, small-scale, and natural (she would later open a tiny, exquisite restaurant featuring Oregon produce), she'd helped start an economics study group with a neo-Marxist slant. Single, she was reported to be a feminist, though it was characteristic of her prickly manner that she disclaimed expertise when I inquired what that meant. I knew I should investigate the women's liberation movement, but kept putting it off, like a hypochondriac in dread of official medical opinion.

Nadine Reiter, I at first regarded warily. She was married, had a five-year-old daughter, and was expecting a second child. She had taught English in the Portland schools, but now her husband, Mark, supported the family with some kind of regular job in the social services. She trailed around their house (shared with several young Community members) in a floor-length cotton dress, mingling energetic housework with spirited arguments about Community politics, offering opinions on Kenneth Patchen's poems or Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body*—but looking, I thought, rather too much like a housewife, altogether too barefoot and pregnant for my taste. Yet people were drawn to her; she was one who made things happen. She lacked the aura of dowdy martyrdom that clung to several other Community wives who'd arrived among us on their husbands' coattails.

Nadine possessed no striking beauty, no overtly provocative ways, so I realized only gradually her remarkable talent for erotic persuasion. Her face was long, eyes narrowly set above high, prominent cheekbones. (The cheekbones were beautiful.) Her wide mouth was always in motion—talking, laughing, eating, pronouncing everything with that distinctive Brooklyn accent—and perhaps it was this mobility that made her so attractive, the liveliness, the interest she took in everyone around her, the passion of her judgments, her indignation at cruelty, at the cruelty of convention, of “normal” families and childhoods. She never used makeup, she wore what we all did then—long dresses cut from imported Indian bedspreads, short dresses over jeans, head scarves, overalls.

Nadine ran her house like a perpetual salon, populated at most hours of the day by assorted Community members. Among her regulars was Norman Migdoff, an old friend from New York, who'd given up tenure at Reed and now worked tirelessly to make our experiment succeed. When the conversation turned to some brewing controversy—for example, Community membership criteria—Nadine gravitated toward the affective dimension of the issues, trying to interpret political positions in terms of underlying feelings. She kept a semipublic diary, sometimes reading aloud from it and including relevant portions in *The Rag*, the Learning Community's periodical of record (where I myself had begun to print my poems). The entries

sometimes referred to her therapy sessions. I knew she was seeing a real analyst, a German neo-Freudian, couch and all.

Josh and I would sit at her kitchen table and watch her work away, mixing bread from the Tassajara cookbook, spreading oily raw granola on cookie sheets to bake, all without missing a beat in the conversation. When we saw her right after the birth of her daughter Liesel, I thought she handled the baby as deftly as challah dough.

She would talk about herself—her feelings about mothering, her anger at a painful childhood, her orgasms, even, with a candor that attracted and unnerved me. She told stories of her affair with a former student, a woman named Claire whom she spoke of as the love of her life. The relationship, and Nadine's refusal to hide it, had resulted in the loss of her teaching job. Despite my own recent experience with Alexa, this caught me by surprise: I hadn't expected such a thing to pop up in the life of a wife and mother in her thirties. Her stories reeled forth at a level of detail that almost assumed you knew the characters personally, as indeed you felt you did when she referred to mileposts like "when Claire wouldn't make love with me anymore" as matter-of-factly as she'd say, "when Mark and I got married."

Yet she wasn't self-centered, not in the usual sense. She believed in her teacherly knack for seeing things in others, for drawing what was special (or "amazing," her favorite word) from the depths of those who mistrusted their own powers. I saw how she collected people, multiplied intimacy. I, who'd always had a thing for teachers, certainly wished that she would single me out, but I acted diffident, reluctant to vie for attention with all her other special ones. "You should make a point of saying hello to Nadine," Josh warned me once when we'd seen her in a crowd. "It really hurts her feelings when you don't."

He and I were living with several other ex-Reedies (though Josh, a nonconformist even among dropouts, planned to finish his senior thesis) in an old house full of romantic dark woodwork, a laden plum tree in the small yard. Short blocks away were the other collective houses, with names like Plotafoot and Leviathan, in whose living rooms Community members gathered, self-selected by intellectual and/or affectional inclination, to discuss Kate Millett's frontal assault on male chauvinist fiction, Anaïs Nin's diaries, Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, Baran and Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital*.

Besides all those study groups, there were incessant, often contentious meetings to decide policy and plan future projects. I was less involved than Josh in the substance within the process, the ins and outs of all the battles. Instead, I divvied up my political energies, attending meetings of a nascent radical women's organization and joining the editorial collective of the *Willamette Bridge*, Portland's underground paper. Among the articles I wrote were several on the activities of the Portland chapter of the Black Panther party. With other Community members, I participated in a Panther-led boycott of a local supermarket chain, aligning myself with the multidimensional ferment we referred to as the Movement and thought of as converging on eventual revolution. For the first time, I was able to frame my frustration with my prospects in political terms, and to consider that the multitude of social ills claiming my attention might be bound up with the power imbalance between the sexes. I dreamed of using my writing to explore what it would take to liberate women.

Although I hadn't yet heard the slogan "The future is female"—it probably hadn't even been coined at the time—I was having a presentiment of the faith it articulates.

In flashes, I could sense that my gendered lot might offer creative openings. I saw that women like me were claiming social space in places like the Community, which hosted occasional events and gatherings just for women, and the *Bridge*, where feminist ideas freely circulated. Working together, we could hope to reshape the very meaning of womanhood, changing ourselves in the process. The fact that my notion of “women” was so narrow, that I vaguely imagined more than half the planet might share some version of my personal concerns, as peculiarly local, class- and race-bound as they were, was, of course, a serious flaw in my approach, as it was in so much white feminist thinking of that era. Yet I can’t dismiss the significance of the moment in which I first grasped the possibility of being my female self *and* socially effective.

Josh and I had assumed a respectably coupled stance that belied the anxiety I’d felt back in May, when I wrote in my journal, “He is the 9th person I have slept with, and this bothers me because I am not yet 20 & I think I know a lot about love—and why is it that I cannot live up to the old ideal of permanence?” I was moved by the contrast between his surface diffidence—what he would say—and what his body admitted, wordlessly, in the privacy of our sex. He voiced all sorts of tricky philosophical reservations—could he really care for me? what, in fact, does it mean to care, given our radical human isolation?—but I felt a degree of assurance that he wouldn’t abandon me.

And so I engaged in a sort of negative magic, an almost superstitious avoidance of patterns that had spelled trouble in the past, especially with Sasha. I liked that I’d been the erotic aggressor with Josh, liked the ways in which my broader experience of sex made him seem touchingly vulnerable at times. He seemed to understand my horror of domesticity. I can’t remember who started it, but soon he was calling me “my little husband” and answering to “my little wife.”

If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise. I’m looking at a photograph of Nadine and Josh, the only picture I own of either. It’s a 3½-by-3½ black-and-white snapshot, date-stamped APR 71. I think it’s from a session of the morning study group known as “Reading and Eating.” The two of them sit, looking very like a couple (the Jewish queen and her young goyish consort), at the far end of Nadine’s dining table. Their elbows seem to touch behind a jar of granola. The stuff of our everyday feasts takes up all of the foreground. A gallon of whole milk from the Food Conspiracy is larger than Nadine’s head and shoulders; there’s a loaf of what looks like homemade Irish soda bread, an uncapped bottle of maple syrup. Josh, laughing in that cagey way he had, squinting behind his oblong granny glasses, as though the laughter were being squeezed out of him, leans his cheek on his right hand. His mouth pulls to the left. His teeth gleam white between mustache and sketchy beard, both many shades darker than the sun-streaked tresses that drape over his shoulders.

Nadine smiles from behind the milk bottle, her bright face tilted forward, the fringe of her glossy dark hair the darkest thing in the composition. She’s radiant, attentive, yet simultaneously abstracted. Her smile has something in it that points to complications, perhaps as innocent as the thought that the baby will soon need to be fed, or as guilty as the worry that someone who used to be her lover and is present at

this table is about to make a scene. She glows remotely, like a goddess, an important executive, or the honored, efficient mother of a sizable family. Behind her, propped against a many-paned window, a dried starfish is silhouetted. It completes my sense that this scene is a tarot card, crammed with emblems of luck and plenty. Just in front of the camera, the hand of an unseen diner reaches toward the irresistible food.

While many of the senior Community members wielded influence proportional to their erstwhile teacher roles, Nadine and her pal Norman Migdoff rapidly emerged as something like the symbolic Mother and Father of an institution so protean, so averse to rules and forms, that it inescapably fell back on the template of that most primitive and fraught of social structures, the nuclear family. The two of them clearly had some special understanding, but because they were grown-ups and parents and married to other people it took forever for me to figure out that they had recently been lovers. I did learn early on of Nadine's affair with her housemate Paul Nardis, a former Reedie who played piano, practicing Chopin nocturnes on Glenda Tate's battered upright, devoured psychoanalytic theory, and cultivated a brilliant polemical style that recommended him to Josh.

Paul was skinny, distinctly unmuscular, with an elongated trunk and legs surprisingly short for such a tall person. He wore sweeping garments at times—a Dracula cape, a kimono in lieu of a bathrobe—clothing that complemented the characteristic haughty motion with which he flung lank locks over one narrow shoulder. Like Nadine (I supposed he'd learned it from her) he always said “making love,” never “fucking” or “having sex.” He reminded me of a big young fragile bird with a cruel beak. In his suffering, he'd peck your eyes out. He stayed at Josh's and my house after Nadine broke off with him, before she gave birth to Liesel, when her pregnancy was pretty far along and she said she couldn't handle the tension with Mark anymore. She'd been Paul's first lover, and he'd been very vulnerable. Now he was distraught, briefly close to suicide. At the time, I wrote in my journal that it was incomprehensible how he'd allowed Nadine to become “everything” to him. It must be, I concluded, because he was a man, and thus had never had to learn to be more prudent. I wrote that I thought of making love with him.

Caustic Paul dubbed Nadine “the woman who sold love.” And Glenda Tate, whom I thought very sexy in her way, all reticence, a rose protected by cultivated thorns, contributed to *The Rag* a wicked quip about a “ménage à *n*, where *n* is very large.” It had much to do with Nadine's tutelage that it would come to seem utterly natural to check my own erotic temperature and pulse as automatically as I would the time of day, highlighting ambiguous and often fleeting feelings for people of either gender. I liked to think of her as the high priestess in the tarot, by which system of divination she and Paul, at the height of their intimacy, had seemed nearly as enthralled as by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's byzantine apparatus of good and bad breasts. (Not to appear unduly reverent, Paul liked to say that the letters “B” and “J” on the pillars flanking the priestess stood for “blow job.”) Nadine kept proclaiming how needy she was, how easily undermined, but I mostly couldn't see it. I was too much in awe of her ability to take exactly the risk I couldn't, to make a big deal of her feelings.

The fact that Nadine was on such an emotional roller coaster—“driven,” as she said, and quoted her analyst's warning that she seemed to be shadowed by a ruthless

destructive force—should have alerted me to the ultimately impersonal nature of all this intimacy. Like a sacred prostitute, or some pop goddess on a billboard, she'd attained to a pitch of promiscuity that aimed at voracious connection. In fact, I *was* suspicious at first. But in the end I volunteered to be another Paul, to get singed in the flame of her passionate patronage.

During the winter and spring of 1971, I consciously cultivated protolesbian sentiments. Much of my excitement was generalized, rising like steam off events—a *Bridge* editorial meeting, a gourmet women-only dinner chez Glenda—that brought my kind together. I was sensing not only a powerful group dimension to eros, but the fact that a discovery of women as romantic is just a step away from finding one to fall in love with.

I cared a lot for Josh, and it hadn't escaped me that ours was the most satisfying sex I'd had since leaving Sasha, but those important facts couldn't stem my restlessness. Josh was moody; his depth meant difficulty. I felt the tug of his unstated needs, the irritation of our housemates at his efforts to enforce punctilious standards of household maintenance. As he slogged through his senior thesis, he grew more curmudgeonly, reinforcing in me an ambivalence I'd noted in the fall: "great flashes of affection & love—then, the feeling that no matter what our love is like, something is stifled by it, something I might be becoming." That "something" was connected, in part, to my urge to plunge deeper into the intricacies of a lush all-female world that seemed to be forming within the shell of gender-mixed society. At Christmas, I'd sketched our Community holiday dinner: "Arlie, always Beautiful Woman to me. Marge, a 19th-century suffragette in her long coat and scarf. Lizzie always a wench, somehow sexually attractive to me too. . . . Mark, at one point sitting at Nadine's feet looking like a high-school kid worried about his girl. Paul and Nadine are so beautiful together, beyond their personal selves there is an archetypal scary quality. A woman and her young lover—darkness—I am also emotionally-sexually attracted to Nadine. Who isn't."

Though the process was neither linear nor completely conscious, I think it's accurate to say that as this world of women took on vibrancy and substance, the world of men—which I'd mistaken for *the world!*—dimmed in my mind's eye; its denizens acquired a washed-out, sickly look. I had some sympathy for their problems, but couldn't help noticing that from my new vantage point their force appeared fragile, their self-importance laughable, their clumsiness with emotions potentially dangerous to children and other living things. "Women seem so strong to me now—I feel that we start out ahead in some way."

I wasn't the least bit daunted by the prospect of perversion, which sounded to me enticingly subversive; I only worried that I might not come off as a credible woman lover, given that my lust felt so tentative. (It was strong enough, at least, for me to devote many pages of my journal to a pornographic saga featuring characters based on Alexa and Sasha's friend Naomi Marks.) With men, my hesitations hadn't mattered so much because they were inclined to make the first move. But in a situation where it looked as though I'd have to take the initiative, I somehow wasn't sure of my right to this desire that was neither overpowering nor respectably single-minded. (*I knew I could do men.*) Nor, in a basically straight milieu, was I at all clear about who might be approachable. By summer, I was strongly attracted to my housemate Arlie, a

heavy-browed beauty who shared my political leanings, and whose deep, melodious voice and sibylline air I'd mistaken for maturity and wisdom. But, much as with Alexa, I found it safer to fantasize and keep my fledgling passion to myself.

The Community was now in serious difficulties: contention growing, projects failing, people leaving. Like so many other experimental institutions of the period, it had purchased the democratic advantage of flexible leadership at the cost of dangerous instability. Once the initial surge of optimistic energy subsided, it proved hard to sustain plodding, incremental growth. When tensions and disagreements took center stage, few structures were in place to forestall dissolution. Add to this a larger political environment wracked by apocalyptic jitters (to cite just one local example, in the summer of 1971 the American Legion held its national convention in Portland, causing widespread expectations of rioting and repression that never materialized) for a picture of the conditions that fed the vortex of libidinous misery I was about to be drawn into.

Josh was one of the worst casualties, though in his case as in others it's hard to sort out how much of the desperation really had collective causes and how much of it would have happened anyway. Throughout the summer and early fall, he slid ever deeper into a depression that seemed connected to his great uncertainty about what to do with the rest of his life now that he'd finished his Reed degree and the Community was failing. He said that only wilderness could console him; he talked of a ranch in Wyoming, but it was clearly only talk. There seemed to be little I could do for him, and our intimacy increasingly felt like a circumscribed space where I was shut up with an anguish I didn't fully understand. I don't recall noticing the obvious parallels to the way I'd felt with Sasha. I only hoped, through rising claustrophobia, that outside attractions could let in oxygen without forcing a breakup.

Lending force to this notion, polyerotics were in the air. As the Community imploded, more and more energy seemed to go into what I view in retrospect as a sort of erotic "*folie à n.*" "I want to scatter my sexuality everywhere," I wrote in midsummer. "I want it to permeate all my relationships, whether a subtle flavoring or the overt taste of the dish." The revolution, a powerful metaphor then, even for people who didn't contemplate literal barricades in their future, was understood to be a transformation so far-reaching that it almost didn't seem to matter whether you started at macro or micro levels, at the furthest reaches of the economy or in the most intimate interstices of psychic life. This imperative to hoist the social order by its heels and shake its pockets out, repeatedly, was exhausting and scary to an extent never imagined by those who envision serial nonmonogamy as a purely hedonistic exercise. We seemed to have a *duty* to chaos.

Along the way, the thrills were real and dangerous enough. A "*ménage à n*" was really a bisexual plot writ large, significant not only because it multiplied one's personal erotic options, but because it allowed vicarious participation in others' intimacies. I have said before that I tended to eroticize my rivals; now I decided it might be worth having rivals for the erotic tension their presence helped to generate. Late in the summer, Josh got interested in a new Community member, a long-legged, pretty girl who unnervingly shared my name. I watched—I encouraged—their burgeoning affair. "How can she be making love with him and not have it be as

though I were making love with her?”

Jealous, energized, I deemed myself a free agent. Joining the Community game of musical residences that mirrored our incessant emotional realignments, I painted a room (it had formerly been Paul’s) at the top of Nadine’s house, newly rechristened the Joy of Cooking, and abruptly quit the attic I’d been sharing with Josh upstairs from several singularly uncongenial housemates. Laurann, a new recruit, lately arrived from the Midwest, was moving into the Joy of Cooking as well. She and Nadine and I were spending a lot of time together. I planned on seeing Josh when it suited me, and I hoped Nadine, who’d kissed me once or twice, would become my other lover.

I never expected to be her one and only. I could see that she didn’t do that, she couldn’t be pinned down that way. I don’t even know if I can say that I fell in love with her. It was more a case of entering her orbit. When she put her hummingbird tongue in my mouth, I thought, No boundaries.

Nadine, however, was sinking into her own vortex of despair. Shortly after my move, she took to visiting Josh’s attic, having sex with him in episodes that she described to Laurann and me as less an affair than a sort of erotic binge. Apparently in ministering to him, she briefly eluded her own misery, a bottomless pit of need and self-disgust that I had trouble picturing (in my eyes she was always brilliant, powerful) but took on faith because she insisted it was there.

I couldn’t bear Josh’s thickening anguish. I felt more frightened by his blank, dissociated way of speaking than I was by a listless suicide attempt. I grasped his suffering as I couldn’t grasp Nadine’s. I believed him when he said the pain was unendurable. He told me he had a feeling of wanting to hoard touches and kisses, as though, if only he stockpiled enough of them, he wouldn’t need actual people anymore. Our former housemates had all moved out, and he spent days in bed in the attic, barely bestirring himself to feed the cats that remained as his sole companions. One evening I stopped by and he’d been baking, but my relief at this small sign of energy faded when he told me he’d made peanut butter cookies because he’d dreamed about them. I wondered when his dreams had become his sole guide to action. Another time he showed up at Joy of Cooking, swaggering in what seemed a macho parody, except that he wasn’t joking. He’d been drinking beer and proclaimed his intention to find Paul and beat the shit out of him.

And still I wanted to make love with Nadine. She spoke so sanely about her “craziness.”

Kissing her, I was thrilled that power could be so soft. Her tongue knew how to do a melting tremolo, her stomach throbbed in time with the pulse of her orgasm, she laughed afterward, and said, “My hair smells like you.”

And then there was the triumph of simply having done it, like breaking the sound barrier or running the four-minute mile. (Why had I imagined I might prove incapable?) Yet I hadn’t shed the old anxieties about how to tell *real* desire from a possible counterfeit: “I keep wondering whether my attraction to women is just something I make up, to be modern (how amazing that when I hold Nadine’s body I’m aroused in the same way as with a man—like finding out you don’t have to be

married to get pregnant).”

Though I wouldn’t have used these words at the time, Nadine stirred a butch ambition, already tested in fantasy, that embarrasses me, not because it’s unfeminine (which indeed it is, as the world reckons these things), but because I’m afraid of being disbelieved. (I know I do a credible femme. Butch aggression is a long shot.)

I mean I wanted to “take” her. To answer yielding with insistence, softness with firmness, enveloping with filling to the brim.

Nadine and I were housemates, but she slept with Mark at night, and the days were filled with taking care of Liesel, talking, cooking, going to shrink appointments. We made love a few times, when she could fit it in. Meanwhile she and Laurann were getting closer. I spent a lot of time with both of them, talking over the communal follies that raged around us, noting how the men, especially, “made themselves stupid” as things fell apart. We came to see ourselves as a troika of seers possessed of understandings beyond the ken of the multitude. Nadine had always supported my writing, and now she saw the poet in me as the source of precocious insights. I’d been singled out as one of the elect, and though I recognized that the general collapse boded no good, the fact was that I found the promise of inclusion in a tiny, women-only avant-garde more enticing than membership in an undifferentiated throng.

The three of us determined to leave the doomed Community. Nadine’s older daughter would stay with Mark; we’d take Liesel with us. We’d rent a cheap house, figure out the next steps from there. (And there was much to figure. Not one of us even had a job.) Amid the general wreckage, it would be good to be together, to bask in the intimacy of aligned perceptions.

I understood that Nadine and Laurann had formed a sort of spiritual couple, but Laurann seemed to be a confirmed celibate and had already vetoed the suggestion that they might sleep together. I thought I’d have Nadine’s body at least, and portions of her attention. It seemed reasonable to hope that, in a quieter atmosphere, there’d be more chances to make love, to spend nights together.

We did have sex a few times once we’d moved to the new place, a flimsy, freezing three-bedroom rental, but it seemed that with attending to Liesel, getting the house in order, and talking over everything endlessly (*à deux* and *à trois*), there still wasn’t much chance for romance.

And then it flipped, like one of those tricky drawings where the background becomes the foreground. The first time that Nadine prevailed on Laurann to spend a night with her—an utterly predictable evolution that I didn’t at all foresee—she didn’t speak of sex. She said that being held the way that Laurann held her was utterly amazing; it felt like everything she’d ever wanted. But I could hear their passion, always in Nadine’s voice, through walls about as soundproof as shower curtains.

Very well, I thought. I can handle this.

We three never thought of ourselves as lesbians, which to Nadine would have meant the surrender of freedom involved in embracing any category, and to me a consistency that was hardly credible given my record of heterosexual dalliance. We claimed, in that house, to be different from everyone (we claimed to be wiser); outlaw sex was only part of it. Being women making love with women seemed like putting one over on society at large. It felt like getting away with something.

My experience with Nadine began to undermine my heterosexual identity, but could not topple it. I'd been inducted into the straight world as a matter of course simply because *I could do men*; now, bigger and stronger than any actual sex act, heterosexuality functioned like a dense, massive planet, whose gravitational field had captured me and could not be escaped absent extraordinary effort. This was especially true because, unlike a lot of ambitious women of varied erotic bents (my avidly heterosexual friend Alexa, for example), I'd never been taunted with appearing "masculine," a charge that draws much of its force from the implication of sexual irregularity. I'd never *felt* abnormal in that sense, which made a revision of my self-description feel pretty optional. The notion of sexual identity, moreover, implies some expectation about the future, and at that point, I didn't imagine a future. So far as I was concerned, we three were a timeless world.

Three women spend a Portland winter in self-imposed exile from corrupt humanity: an existence at once the most austere and the most indulgent imaginable. A rickety house, three tiny upstairs bedrooms. No work, no cash, no friends. (There were food stamps; child support paid the rent; we planned on getting jobs later.) We ignored world events, television, newspapers. We got around on foot, by bus when necessary. We could hardly claim to be artists, though I kept scribbling. Apart from child care for a one-year-old, our only significant project was consciousness itself.

This isolation made it all the rougher for me when Nadine abruptly dismissed me from her bed. Almost as soon as she and Laurann became lovers, she realized she considered their intimacy a marriage, and a monogamous one at that. The shift had everything to do with how their needs intersected, how harsh their mothers had been, how fully Laurann "saw" her.

Laurann was a small, dark-haired woman in her late twenties. Her face was round, her upper front teeth prominent. She spoke softly and seemed gentle until you got to know her. Living with her was like having Emily Dickinson for a roommate—an Emily minus the poetic genius, but with all that ruthless hunger of perception, that selfsame phosphorescent anger. Thinking back on it now, I'm sure that our household's bizarre narrowness, which both Nadine and I temporarily endorsed for very different reasons, had everything to do with Laurann's preferences. She was capable of a terrifying focus, amounting almost to psychic anorexia.

We went for long walks in different combinations, Liesel bouncing in the backpack. We planned and cooked elaborate cheap meals. Nadine and Laurann were much occupied with telling each other the stories of their lives. I tried to keep up; I felt superfluous. I taught myself to masturbate. Laurann pursued a vivid career in shoplifting, halted by the inevitable arrest. Nadine spoke credibly of suicide. I started seeing a shrink—Nadine's.

The life was thrillingly bleak. I thought I could tough it out.

One is able to conduct an existence alongside others only by virtue of sharing a point of view with them. In the case of my life with Nadine and Laurann, this principle was etched in high relief, both because we utterly lacked all the usual incentives

(economic motives, larger social networks) that glue people together when common consciousness gets shaky, and because of our commitment to unstinting self-scrutiny.

I had always been especially sensitive to the ways in which my private thoughts, my inner comments on the world, tended to diverge from others' attitudes and judgments. Most people appeared to take such gaps in stride, maybe didn't even notice. I seemed to be stuck with a perpetual choice between abrasive honesty and the endless small conformities that social life solicits. Because Nadine had especially praised my "vision," and because both she and Laurann seemed to agree with me that it was of the utmost importance to examine and discuss all we each thought and felt, I'd imagined that life in our terrarium would finally afford me a way to be fully engaged with others without compromise.

Of course there is no perfect, permanent fit when it comes to how three people view the world, especially not when two are making love and one is listening. Karl Marx said it best, a long time ago: it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness. Yet the more clearly my emotional interests specified a rapid exit, the harder I scrambled, trying to bring my longings and resentments into line with the proclaimed needs of others, twisting self-analysis to service the illusion that made possible our lopsided threesome.

The conclusion I drew when Nadine declined to be my lover was quite simply that I hadn't been desperate enough. The previous year, when getting to know her, I'd written: "Nadine and I are like polar opposites—she demonstrative, revelatory, dramatizes herself to the point of exhibitionism; I allow everyone to think that I am always calm, quiet, sympathetic, mature, etc., etc." When I finally mounted an explicit protest, tearing out some pages of her famous diary and flinging them in the garbage, I think I imagined I'd made some sort of breakthrough.

Nadine of course didn't see it that way. She was furious, said I'd implied *she* was garbage. How could I echo her own most hateful feelings about herself? It wasn't a matter of logic anymore, of talking myself out of feelings. Even I could see that I had to get out of there.

I was now at the traditional age for college graduation. In a sense, it might be said that I too had graduated, had finished my preparations for adult life by completing a process of divestiture that I'd begun at fifteen, when I rhetorically elevated the destiny of a junkie over that of a professor. My mother, who earned a master's degree in English during my late adolescence, says that when Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" was assigned, she found herself intrigued by the sentence "I would prefer not to," which reminded her of me. It reminds me of me then, too. To paraphrase my old friend William Blake, I hadn't been able to know what was enough until I knew what was less than enough.

Of course I didn't jettison everything. I was still a middle-class child; I never faced starvation. But somehow, during the winter with Nadine and Laurann, I managed to strip down as far as necessary. Walking the midnight streets to get away from their ardor, I finally had my fill of solitude. Penniless, friendless, detached from human structures, I tried my survival skills and found them serviceable. Afterward, "preferring not to" took a back seat to preferring; I was able to claim as my own the work I undertook, the poems I wrote, the great city I adopted, the lovers I bedded

down with.

That's not, of course, to say that my path was smooth thereafter. Repeatedly, I've come to junctures in my life where it has seemed that the only way I could move forward was to move dramatically. It's apparently my fate to be drawn to extremes, to a standard of purity that I've luckily never been able to live up to. The Learning Community and its attempted "ménages à *n*" would have their echoes in my later relationships with People in Groups.

In keeping with the spirit of the times, the Community had tried valiantly to push the limits of alleged human nature. A bit less grandiosely, one might say that we joined a sincere and vigorous but naive current—"the counterculture"—that attempted nothing less than the radical revision of a supremely individualist social order. Although I don't recall being aware of it then, the sexual ambiguity and borderlessness we cultivated—our refusal to notice anything unusual in the attractions of men and women to either gender, our suspicion of sexual exclusivity and consequent enthusiasm for risky emotional experiments, as well as our failure to be shocked by sexual liaisons between mature adults and postadolescents who might have been their students—were consonant with the mood of early gay liberation.

Even in gay and lesbian circles, few people today remember that in the period following the Stonewall rebellion a radical gay movement proposed to abolish both "the heterosexual" and "the homosexual" as mutually exclusive categories of human beings. Some of its adherents espoused "gender-fuck" (a variant transvestite practice that eschewed the superfeminine ideal of traditional drag in favor of startling mixtures such as beards with evening gowns); "radical effeminacy" (a feminist-inspired critique of conventional masculinity); and unorthodox unions like the marriage of the radical feminist poet Robin Morgan to the radical "faggot" poet Kenneth Pitchford. In a polemic representative of this radical position, originally published in the underground newspaper *Rat*, the lesbian writer Martha Shelley accused the straight world of having repressed its own homosexual feelings, in the process creating a class of sexual pariahs: "We want you to understand what it is to be our kind of outcast—but also to understand our kind of love, to hunger for your own sex. . . . We will never go straight until you go gay. . . . And because we will not wait, your awakening may be a . . . bloody one."

This nervy assault on the basic categories by means of which the modern West has organized its understanding of the sexual self quickly gave way to what has been called the "ethnic model" of gay identity. In this model, homosexuals are a coherent, bounded social group, entitled to claim rights and press for improvements in status on the same grounds as racial and ethnic minorities. While the model has made pragmatic political sense, it has the distinct disadvantage of hardening sexual boundaries, giving queers a reason to require declarations of sexual allegiance. In turn, the perceived need for a solid identity has fed enthusiasm on the part of some gay activists for biological explanations of sexual orientation.

Although the post-Stonewall period may seem terribly remote, its legacy is very much with us in the form of our enhanced awareness of the potential for flexibility in sexual as well as political formations. Indeed, I think that the popular appeal of theories that promise to anchor something as confusing as desire in the solidity of observable physical traits owes much to a widespread longing to escape pervasive

intimations of fluidity.

We who were young and sexually rebellious in the early 1970s were mistaken not in questioning the supposed immutability of erotic types and the naturalness of existing gender categories, but rather in embracing a too impatient faith in deliberate, short-term changes. We reckoned insufficiently on the tenacity with which a social order inheres in the tiniest cells of psychic life. Our tragedy (or maybe it's a blessing in disguise, maybe the problem has been our tidy notion of revolution) is that, while "human nature" can and does evolve with altered social circumstances, no group has ever exerted very much control over the direction and timing of those shifts.

The *ménage à n* crashed, and great was its fall. I crawled out of the bunker and surveyed the carnage. The Community was a shambles. Josh, whose parents had spirited him away to a psychiatric hospital in Sonoma County, had been discharged to their care and was working for his father, dwelling in sunny poolside opulence, a prisoner of the very environment I imagined had predisposed him to suicidal anomie in the first place. I had long since ceased to cultivate my few other friends. My last gainful employment, many months before, had been selling popcorn and candy at the Blue Mouse Theater, a barely respectable downtown cinema showing mostly budget westerns.

Though devastated, I was on my mettle. I had to find a place to live, figure out what to live on. A few months before, seeking alternatives to real work, I'd cobbled together a couple of sleazy confession stories, which I'd dropped in the mail and forgotten about. Now, miraculously, I heard from Dauntless Books, Inc. the news that they were buying "Sex Was My Diet Pill" and "My Disease Dampened His Desire." I received, just in time, several hundred dollars (and of course began cranking out trash at top speed, but never again managed to sell a line of the stuff). I rented a furnished studio apartment in a building full of the sad old aimless white guys Portland used to specialize in, and took a job next door at a Winchell's Donut House. My title was counter girl. I punched a clock, provided my own uniform, and made minimum wage and all the doughnuts I could eat. By the time I left to train as a nurse's aide at the V.A. Hospital (more sad old aimless white guys), I'd worked up to the skilled, lonely glory of night baker.

Any Woman Can

JOURNAL ENTRIES

The thing about lesbianism is that I love women—in multiples, sort of—their bodies, their relationships. I don't feel as though I would want a close romantic relationship with one woman—or [I feel] that, if I did, it would be little different than that with a man. . . . I don't love men as a group or find them interesting as I do women. (June 1973)

On one hand I like the word *lesbian* because it implies a world of women—and that is the phenomenon that continues to delight and astonish me. On the other hand I find it very misleading because it tends to reinforce people's conceptions of a world with exactly two sides, two sexual orientations and no more. . . . Homosexual love is the great rejoicing of finding something that seemed lost, of touching something that seemed forbidden, removed forever. (December 1973)

I really don't think I'm obsessed w/ Nadine, the individual Nadine, anymore . . . but rather with the Nadine “a woman/no woman/such as comes in dreams”—the Nadine that is also the Naomi Marks and the impossible Alexa I once flirted with and all the others. . . . She is everything I desire. She is myself—or rather, I am herself. (April 1974)

Paul appears in my life, creates a local disturbance, disappears again. . . . It's horrible when I feel indifference, worse when I feel passion. Which, as we all know, tends to be intensified by absence, by withholding. He withholds his body from me. Not in theory, in practice. And then I'm tormented by the old contradiction: my lust for a woman. If I want one so much I can't want the other so much, it's a contradiction. But I do. (September 1974)

I am simply not the bar dyke type. Yet my whole effort (or series of efforts) at making myself a woman in relation to men seems to be about at an end. (October 1974)

When does coming out begin? How long does it take? Exactly five years and the breadth of a continent separate the autumn of my first conscious bisexual plotting, Ned against Alexa, from the autumn when I exited the sterile Queens apartment I shared with Paul Nardis for a threadbare floor-through near Prospect Park in Brooklyn, where I planned to pursue a lesbian existence.

Paul and I got together late in the summer of 1972. About six months had elapsed since my break with Nadine. My life consisted of my Winchell's doughnut job and twice-a-week visits to Nadine's analyst, Dr. Eugen Beck. Fatherly, decent, liberal-though-German (he'd grown up under the Nazis as a matter of fact, and spoke a disconcertingly accented English), Beck was also treating Paul, and had other patients who'd belonged to the Learning Community. He ran his own *ménage à n*.

I was writing poems and beginning to submit them to little magazines and feminist newspapers, some published in distant cities. (I was ambitious but skittish; when *Hanging Loose* in Brooklyn accepted "i am not a field-goal kicker," I agonized over whether to furnish the requested bio note. I feared contamination by a status-conscious poetry establishment: *Better a junkie than a professor be*.) I was also scribbling longhand drafts of stories I tended to leave unfinished, mostly erotic serials with characters loosely based on women I'd fancied, among them two Winchell's coworkers. What if Carol, who'd trained me as night baker (her blowsy bully of a mother ran the shop), were to be seduced, not altogether gently, by slatternly Roberta?

I was intrigued by the bizarre and soul-destroying "world of work," notwithstanding the fact that the job was classic feminine drudgery, quite lacking the virile glamour of the Beats' sporadic ventures into the labor force. (Not that I looked to the likes of Kerouac and Snyder for guidance anymore, but they'd impressed on me their masculine notions of writing and rebelling, an influence that persisted.) I still believed that all experience is sacred, bright motes of being dancing in the eye of nothingness. Now my nights at Winchell's contrasted with my scholastic past like some weird dramatization of the mind/body problem, as if I'd given up cavorting in a realm of pure thought to be these sturdy, weary legs that propped me up behind the counter; this flour-smudged face that smiled at sexist men; these arms that hoisted giant bowls of yeast dough, punched out my "raise" with mechanical precision, and cranked the hopper over the vat of reeking grease; this trigger finger on the jelly pump. I'd elected an untutored, all-American desperation. It hadn't read a word of Heidegger.

It was desperation lite, fueled on simple carbohydrates. I did enjoy a maple bar at times, a newbaked yeasty pillow, frosting not yet hardened to brittle varnish. I liked the catty gossip, the sexual innuendo (Roberta's name was linked with those of several taxi drivers), the chemical rush of top-forty radio flogging me through the dead zone after midnight.

I couldn't shake the grandiose, shameful sense of having volunteered for incarnation. I knew that this attitude, plus my absorption in books, my family history in Bellevue, meant I wasn't a full-fledged "worker," though I worked hard enough. (Too hard maybe: real workers cut more corners.) I was and wasn't in the same boat as the weary-feisty "girls," some already mothers, cornered by sex and difficulty, with whom I punched the clock and shot the breeze. I'd meet more wasted lovelies up at the V.A. Hospital, where I'd work on a cardiac ward the following year. Did I want to

be them, bed them, or just get them into language? As usual, the categories blurred.

I'd initially been attracted to Paul when his gaunt, sardonic figure, romantic with damage, had loomed through the Learning Community's polysexual miasma. Becoming lovers with him now bespoke some continuity, and in my depleted state I definitely welcomed the prospect of a connection I wouldn't need to build from scratch. We shared desolation you had to have been there for: we'd both been snared by Nadine's addictive love, both cared for Josh and failed him.

So we began in a tentative mood, with a middle-aged sense that our gestures postdated everything of real importance. Then we continued, still young after all, more resilient than we figured we had any right to be.

I was proud of my dropout status, had no plans to return to school. Paul, however, was finishing his B.A. at Lewis and Clark College and beginning to investigate graduate programs. He contemplated training as a lay analyst.

Like all my lovers, Paul became my teacher. Having learned from Sasha about steam railroads and from Josh about the art of wilderness survival, I now boned up on psychoanalysis. Ferenczi, Horney, Bowlby, Winnicott, cathexis and primary process, the Basic Fault and the Good Enough Mother, were old friends of Paul's, to whom he eagerly introduced me. He played the piano with less technical expertise than commitment to what he called "musicality," an elusive but crucial aspect of performance that he connected to the subtleties of feeling he talked about with Beck. His musical opinions had the force of moral ones. He revered Bruno Walter, abominated Toscanini. I wasn't sure I heard the difference, any more than I was sure (from my horizontal position on Beck's Naugahyde couch) that the talking cure could really rearrange me for the better.

Paul was nothing like a woman, but he wasn't manly either. Despite his arrogance, it was tough to picture him in the lordly role that some of my boyfriends had affected. For one thing, he hailed from Cambridge, Massachusetts, which made him the quintessential effete easterner, one of those people for whom culture precedes nature. A hike to an alpine meadow would remind him of a poem, the Oregon coast of an oceanic feeling. Before me, he'd had two lovers, both women in their thirties; besides Nadine, there was Florence, Norman Migdoff's ex. I myself was a year his senior, and still envisioned him as the white-limbed bitter youth lounging in a dressing gown, the sleepyhead to whom pregnant Nadine used to bring a precoital wake-up present of milk and chocolate chip cookies after her husband left for work. Our histories with her seemed to position us as sweetly perverted siblings.

Our sex, Paul's and mine, was energetic but spotty. More than other men I'd been with he was subject to fits and starts, to gusts of ambivalence I tried not to take too personally. Long before we were lovers I'd heard him proclaim that sixty-nine was his favorite recreation. I too liked oral sex (preferring giving to receiving), but hadn't gotten past my old-fashioned conviction that penis-in-vagina was the ultimate intimacy available to persons with disparate genitals.

I worried that my body seemed like too much work to him. When he came, it seemed an assertion of will as much as pleasure. When I couldn't come myself, I felt abandoned, almost jilted, mired in a swamp of sticky, unattractive needs. I masturbated often, sometimes while he slept beside me; if he ever noticed, he didn't mention it. I worried about this penchant for accessible satisfactions, which I deemed

inferior to the partnered ones that (not always, but too often) proved elusive. Yet I liked the way our relationship minimized the disgrace of conventional boy-girl goings-on, precisely because Paul shared (for different reasons, to be sure) my reservations about that combination. He was heterosexual in an interrogative mode, freely admitting, for instance, an erotic dimension to his friendship with Josh.

Paul thought he wanted “something” from a man. I was happy to talk about it, and not just because I welcomed the chance to discuss yet again my feelings for women, but because it brought me closer to the world of male desire that had attracted me at least since junior high and my obsession with T.E. Lawrence. The two of us cultivated a garden of perversion, fantasizing a threesome with Paul’s friend Jonathan, a husky ex-Reedie from White Plains now employed as a machinist. Jonathan cooked fantastic Szechuan food, was a guilty hedonist, nursed leftist sympathies, and kept falling in love with straight guys. He claimed the Marlboro Man as his erotic ideal, a daring statement in that longhaired era, when “androgynous” was a term of approbation and the Castro Street clone had not as yet arrived to popularize gay macho.

Jonathan asked me to be his date for his company’s Christmas party. He wasn’t out at work, and thought it would make life easier if he put on a small charade of normalcy. I went, in a flowered shawl that Nadine had given me, the two of us high on Bacardi he’d supplied. We danced to the trite pop music, ate the vulgar American dinner, and chortled up our sleeves at the success of our imposture. Even if I couldn’t make the leap to lesbianism (which I persistently imagined on an all-or-nothing basis), it felt fine to spit in the soup of heterosexual presumption.

The increasingly urgent question of whether my feelings for one man could outweigh the attractions of women as a people was a new version of my familiar difficulty in squaring flickering desires with an ideal of constancy. I couldn’t seem to stop looking for certainty in eros, couldn’t get it through my head that gray areas might be part of the very landscape of my longing.

Being with Paul was an interim solution. In effect, he and I seceded from straighthood together. Our relationship turned on a new kind of bisexual plot, its tension imparted by the lively possibility that one of us might leave the other *for a gender*. We actually drew closer in the shivery dance of “*Maybe I’m gay.*” “*Yeah, and what if I’m gay,*” our sex infused with urgency by the thought that a quite different body was possibly what was wanted. Simultaneously, we mocked the flesh’s literalness; our thought experiments in homosexuality (not to mention our exposure to psychoanalytic theory) kept reminding us that gender is a work of imagination. Our lying down together felt valedictory, as though we were performing ancient rituals that an age of skepticism had radically undermined. I wrote of this with fierce ambivalence, in a poem I titled after a sentimental ballad whose lyrics still evoked the shadowed grove of mysterious longing I’d entered as a child through the door of Mother’s voice singing me to sleep at night.

DEEP PURPLE

The old
is engraved
somewhere on the brain.

When we meet,
the dream or dream-setting:

bombed-out city,
flesh of water,
mountains:
their piled-on permanences.

I am woman-
country.
You sink into me
like Southeast Asian jungle

like the old
lush smelly primeval
forest Daddy knew
the poem about,

and we still fit
our irregular edges together

in the old ways.

I have made my relationship with Paul sound neatly symmetrical, but as the poem hints, it wasn't. Didn't I take more interest in his world of men than he did in my world of women? (It is true that I might not have welcomed his intrusion in my world, but that was beside the point.) If I could feature being a boy (at least not quite a girl) for him, I didn't think he'd care to reciprocate. The question *why did Paul want to have his lust with me?* was finally framed by the brute social fact that in patriarchy, male is beautiful. ("Beck said that I think male homosexual love is ideal because there are no breasts involved.")

So why should I want to have my lust with him?

After Nadine, I knew I could do women, but not casually. I thought of lesbianism as a high-walled cloister garden, a lushness contingent on withdrawal from the world, on heroic renunciation. (Why did it please me to think of it this way? And what had I to renounce? Not penises so much as gray areas.) I felt defensive in the presence of the dykes I met, mostly lefties whom I viewed as right-on feminist militants. Following dinner with a couple who were friends of Jonathan's, I exhorted myself to "just be around some lesbians, and stop thinking of lesbianism as such a mystical thing."

When I read my work at an event where most of the poets were lesbians, attended an antiwar demo where women held hands and chanted, "Hey, hey, whaddya say, bombing dikes is antigay," I felt as though my waffling were branded on my forehead. As often happens with me and People in Groups, I worried too much about admissions standards. It was catch-22: I'd never have been attracted to a club that let just anybody in.

Sex aside, with Paul I was anxious to demonstrate that I was capable of having what I thought of as a healthy relationship. I needed a love that wouldn't crash and burn. I couldn't afford another fuckup.

When I stood back to evaluate, I felt I was making progress. I wasn't in thrall to Paul, as I'd been to Nadine, nor was he a millstone around my conscience, like Sasha and Josh. We were capable of silly, sordid fights, but the damage was on the surface. (In the end, we would let each other go more gracefully than I've managed with anyone before or since.)

Paul settled on a doctoral program in psychology at a university in New York. He would be pleased if I decided I'd like to come along, but understood I might have other needs. I vacillated, half eager to ditch my West Coast self for a try at the wicked East, half embarrassed to think that my fate would, as usual, be taking shape around someone else's prudent planning. (Covertly, however, I relished this very randomness.) Though I didn't expect to be with Paul forever, I didn't want to part from him now for a merely geographical reason. And I knew I'd have a tough time leaving Portland on my own, without the nudge that he provided. Left to myself I'd simply dither, awed by the possibilities. Paul proposed a definite destination, one that happened to be perfect for an aspiring writer.

There were no West Coast people I would miss unbearably, provided I could see them now and then, but it grieved me as though I were parting from a lover to lose the trees and mountains. *Before culture was, I am*, they proclaimed, in the language-before-language of my deepest childhood. To visit them would never be enough.

Did I know I was arranging to be endlessly divided? I told myself I could always change my mind. In September, Paul flew east while I stayed put, continuing to check vital signs, stuff withered dicks into condom catheters, force nourishment on the dying, and restrain the crazed—all in a day's work at the V.A. Hospital. I was saving what money I could for the move. One day I called a code on an old man without a pulse, thumping his chest smartly, blowing my timid breath into his corpse's cavity, bringing down the wrath of the defibrillator. "He's got C.A.," an older aide confided. "Good thing you didn't get too close." I knew some of the aides believed cancer to be catching, but it amazed me she'd assumed I'd be cynical enough to make less than a total effort. My Lazarus died days later in Intensive Care.

In November I gave two weeks' notice at the hospital. I "terminated" with Beck. I packed up my things, books and papers mostly, in five or six cardboard cartons and mailed them to Flushing, Queens, where the rents were low and Paul, who'd stayed with an aunt for the fall semester, had signed a lease on a one-bedroom apartment.

Wanting to savor my metamorphosis, I'd decided to take the train across Canada. I left one evening in mid-December. My friend Julie and I took turns in a photo booth in the Portland Greyhound station, trading souvenir snapshots before she put me on an overnight bus to Vancouver. Early the next morning, dazed with lack of sleep (and with four more bedless nights to look forward to, between the train and the bus from Montreal), weighed down by the bulging backpack that was my only piece of luggage but determined to wring from my travels every drop of experience, I explored the streets of boxy houses built from Pacific timber. My father had taught me to appreciate these soft woods, Douglas fir and true fir and redwood and cedar, that had

been our ticket to class mobility. The winter air was moist, great mountains a fact of city living. Vancouver was foreign, but it felt like home in a way the deciduous east would never be.

As I soaked up the last of the West and nursed nostalgia for fringe exploits (it was here in Vancouver during the Trips Festival that Sasha had been entranced with Naomi Marks at the height of her stoned powers), a flock of pigeons squirted shit on my old red jacket. I wasn't pleased, but tried to think of it as some sort of zany benediction while scrubbing off in a service station rest room. I finally got settled in the train, which slouched interminably through the ugly sprawl of New Westminster before ascending into subtle hills with their variegations of rock and lichen, their straitened spectrum of browns and grays and the thousand muted greens of a northwest forest at winter solstice.

When at last we hit snow country—Alberta of frozen lakes and bundled figures fishing through the ice, open tracts of hardwoods and patches of scrubby pine—the change seemed almost festive. My companions for the long haul in the cushy steerage of coach included an orange-garbed Hare Krishna and lots of hippies and teenyboppers who were overjoyed to be thrown together for the journey and kept up an incessant low-key sexual agitation. I spoke to almost no one, but looked out the window, wrote in my notebook, and read Henry James's *Roderick Hudson*. I savored these landlocked provinces—their icy desolation, the heroic bulk of the land mass, my suggestive glimpses into the nooks and crannies of towns like Capreol, Ontario, where the jukebox in the slummy trackside restaurant played Elton John's "Elderberry Wine" as we watched the crew make up separate trains for Toronto and Montreal—with complacency enhanced by forward motion. I could have been watching my ancestral past (Bemidji, Minnesota; Fountain City, Wisconsin) flash before my eyes. I would never forget that darkest North America had made me, or cease to give thanks that I didn't have to live here.

My bus arrived at the Port Authority in the aftermath of an ice storm. Exhausted, and dismayed by the tawdry bustle of the place, I phoned Paul to come and meet me. While I waited for him, I eavesdropped on a young woman's conversation with a couple of Trailways drivers. She danced in clubs, she said. She stripped, but you weren't allowed to take everything off. "Come on, do you at least give 'em a little peek now and then?" one of the men pursued. "Oh sure," she laughed, "you have to air it out once in a while." What shocked me was her diction, the complicity of that *it*. As if sharing the joke of her body could lift her to their level.

I transcribed the exchange in my journal. I'd come to be a writer, after all.

I'd also come to be a different woman, though I didn't exactly say so, not even to myself, for fear of failing.

Paul led me home to our brick apartment building, a ten-minute walk from the end of the Number 7 train line. The neighborhood had little I could see to recommend it, no instructive blight or bohemian cachet, just block on block of tidy housing and lower-middle-class retail outlets. There was a HOT BAGELS place that sold the real article (chewy, not fluffy, no pastrami-on-a-bagel, no St. Patrick's Day tricks with green food coloring) and shut down for Shabbat and all the Jewish holidays. Going out to dinner in the neighborhood with Paul's relatives meant consuming an

“Oriental” meal as ersatz as though we were living in Spokane and not in a metropolis with a huge Asian population. Once I’d found a clerical job at Scholastic Magazines on Forty-fourth Street, much of my life was spent in contemplating Manhattan’s patrician profile or Shea Stadium’s homely bulk from the vantage point of the elevated train tracks.

Our apartment building boasted a creaky elevator, an incinerator chute on every floor, and monthly exterminator service—all exotic in my eyes. Two of our three rooms overlooked a courtyard that was basically an oversized air shaft. After dark, the lighted lives of total strangers signaled intimately; when spring brought open windows, other people’s fights and crying babies and parties became our atmosphere.

All the same, I was living privately with a lover, a thing I’d never done before, and I felt dismayed by the aura of marriage that clung to the arrangement. It didn’t help that we had so little space. We installed our double bed in what should have been the living room, and our two desks from the Salvation Army in the bedroom, which got direct sunlight. Here we kept a narrow bed used occasionally by guests, more often by one of us when we were arguing or simply preferred to sleep alone. We tried to keep out of each other’s way, but I found it hard to write when Paul was home, and he was, I thought, oversensitive to noise. Even the sound of tarot cards being shuffled could bother him when he was studying.

We fought sporadically over little things. A certain caustic tone of his could set me shrieking. Once in a movie theater I cited the no-smoking rule to a man who lighted up in the row behind us. Paul said that it was priggish to appeal to rules; if the smoke bothered me, I should simply ask him to stop. Before I knew it I was standing on a subway platform, yelling: “Don’t you dare talk to me that way.” I must have been a sight: a short woman with lopped-off hair, in a floor-length skirt that had started life as a bedspread, assaulting my tall lover with a soft-cover copy of Ned Rorem’s diaries. When the train arrived I marched off to ride in a separate car from Paul’s, a fine but foolhardy gesture given the late hour and the fact that the train was perilously empty. I’d been raped on the street in Portland the year before, and that memory now combined with legends of big-city danger, making me far more timid than I liked to admit. The voice of my nebulous anxiety, as banal as a car alarm, nattered endlessly on at the edge of consciousness. I hated it, it seemed so womanish.

At first Paul and I did all the standard New York things. We greeted 1974 with the throngs in Times Square, trekked up to the Cloisters, hung around in the old Willentz’s on Eighth Street or uptown at Gotham Book Mart, leafing through new poetry collections and dog-eared little magazines. I got my first exposure to live opera and ballet, and an astonishing look at Jacqueline Onassis, who floored me simply by being human and uncaptioned when I spied her in a quiet gallery at the Met.

Superficially impressed, I wasn’t satisfied. Culture felt like a hobby; I needed to get a life. I enrolled in a poetry workshop at the 92nd Street Y. I also contacted a high school friend of Jonathan’s, a radical nurse who he’d said could clue me in to what was happening with women’s liberation. She wasn’t exactly encouraging. The local movement, she explained, had been pretty disorganized lately. But there was something called the New York Women’s School, a grassroots effort in Brooklyn, that would be worth checking out.

I had to take the G train to get there from Queens, apprehensive at the thought of traveling over an unknown route to a strange neighborhood. What made it worse was my strap hanger's ignorance of the metropolitan area's surface geography. I seemed to be forever hurtling through the city in intestinal passageways, surfacing to encounter decontextualized strips and patches—Sixth Avenue near Forty-second Street, Sheridan Square and environs, Columbus Circle north to Lincoln Center—whose relation to the whole remained obscure to me. The G, among the most local of all local lines, dawdled for over an hour through depopulated stations before ejecting me in a tattered neighborhood named, oddly, Park Slope. (Terrace or Vista, Row or Hill—but Slope?) I had no inkling then of how its streets and rooms would be mapped onto my brain circuitry, as indelibly as the very different landscapes I'd abandoned in Oregon.

Though the Slope was indeed where I went to find the women, it wasn't yet the "Dyke Slope" that someone in a Sarah Schulman novel refers to with affectionate condescension. That Slope is the Slope of the lesbian baby boom, of women loving women into prime real estate, of dyke chic vying with Lesbian Avengers. In those years most lesbians rented, yuppies hadn't been thought of, and gentrification was a do-it-yourself affair conducted largely by heterosexual couples known as brownstoners. Many buildings had long been divided into rooming houses, with fluorescent light rings on the ceilings, crummy toilets in the halls. Stonework crumbled, wrought iron rusted, plasterboard triumphed over original detail. It would be more than a decade before the smug money crested, bringing the corporate lawyers and investment analysts and cable TV people who think of buying in Brooklyn as roughing it. Before the weekday streets filled up with dark maid-mothers pushing strollers for the pale.

Leslie Kaplow, who cotaught the Women's School course on women's literature that I signed up for (after briefly considering "Introduction to Lesbianism"), heard me complain about Flushing and advised me to move to Brooklyn. She was a great fan of the neighborhood then, her enthusiasm for it having survived what she wryly termed her "Park Slope housewife" years, when she and her husband were fixing up a brownstone. She seemed content to have shed the property along with the marriage; she was free now, out and open, raising her tiny daughter, Emma, in a creaky building on Third Street near Seventh Avenue. I found her very attractive, smart and serious, a passionate partisan of our gender who nonetheless cast a refreshingly cool eye on the limitations of really existing women. Her abrupt demeanor helped keep my little crush in check. So did my chagrined awareness that no self-respecting lesbian would look at me twice. *Living with a man* was damaging enough; doing so in Queens seemed especially outré.

There were, I was discovering, New Yorks and New Yorks; simply by changing locations I could feel like a different person. In Flushing, Paul and I became a "nice young couple" as inexorably as Cinderella's coach reverted to pumpkinhood; in midtown, I camouflaged myself as a dutiful servant of industry; in Brooklyn, I felt more and more like a dyke, though I never tried to pass. I had a horror of being labeled an "experimenter," the sort of woman who toys with real lesbians' affections while hanging on to heterosexual privilege. On the Upper West Side, where my poetry workshop met in the apartment of the teacher, Erica Jong (still a poet with a quiet

reputation; her novel *Fear of Flying* was about to hit the charts), I was a low-class tourist amid the doorman-building set. Workshop members included the kid brother of a regular book reviewer for the *Times* and an heiress who kept a family in Ohio and a chauffeured car in town. I couldn't help but enjoy rubbing up against the corruptions of all this cultural and other capital; nor could I avoid feeling deeply patronized—the scholarship child in the posh nursery school—when they said nice, nervous things about my lesbian lyrics. My “fellatio poem,” so-called, was more their speed.

In moving east I'd promised myself a chunk of summer in Portland, a symbolic dose of nature as a consolation prize for time served in the heart of artifice. I crossed Canada again and stayed for two months, backpacking near Three-Fingered Jack in the Mount Jefferson area with my friend Julie, staying in her room in a house full of strangers while she was out of town. I brooded over sad memories, got a shorter haircut, had my I.U.D. removed. I read a trashy book on Janis Joplin's sex life, written by a woman who claimed to have been her lover. I bought a ritual copy of *The Well of Loneliness* in a women's bookstore in Seattle, amused and embarrassed at the sales clerk's caveat that its view of lesbians was pretty negative and definitely outmoded. (Did I really look like such a neophyte—or such a literal-minded reader?)

Leaving Portland again seemed even more momentous than when I'd headed out the last time. In December I'd been able to say I was giving New York a whirl; now I felt that my relation to the West had shifted permanently. I felt, as well, that I was fast approaching some sort of sexual crossroads. I'd just bought a modest-sized notebook in which I jotted the prediction that I would make love with a woman before filling all its pages.

I took a plane, my first from coast to coast, and this concession to modern travel methods also seemed to mark the finality of my relocation. My future life would be increasingly punctuated by the solemn rituals of takeoff and landing, by the revolutions of baggage carousels, by dizzying transitions from one time zone to another.

In the air I read Kate Millett's *Flying*. It had been an extravagant purchase in hardcover, but I hoped that someone else's chaos could help me. (“Time stops . . . while Teresa Juarez's voice loud butches me from a floor mike center of the room, a bully for all the correct political reasons. Five hundred people looking at me. Are you a Lesbian? . . . Yes I said. Yes. Because I know what she means. The line goes, inflexible as a fascist edict, that bisexuality is a cop-out. Yes I said yes I am a Lesbian. It was the last strength I had.”) In writing about her own gray areas, Kate reassured me that my burning longing to touch a woman again was more than just a figment of my imagination. Or rather: not an *isolated* figment, for if fancy is the truest substance of desire, it still requires backup. I needed to see my imaginings reflected *along with my self-doubt*. (“Go down dream mouth tongue singing on her center tasting knowing her essence. . . . Good it is, lovely the fullness of him in me. But need one be torn, forced to live in one place or another?” This raw report, not Radclyffe's overcooked fable, would be my guide and mirror.)

Kate's girlhood in St. Paul, my mother's town, was a nice coincidence. She'd survived the regime that my parents, who'd also fled, carried on them like a scent—not just the sexual reticence but the suspicion of art and beauty, wherever they go

beyond the safely decorative, wherever they interfere with steady habits and killing work, with business as usual.

Back in Flushing, I found myself on an interesting edge. Paul and I still made love, but seemed less and less like a couple. He took to showing up with bite marks on his neck, to calling from noisy bars to say he'd see me in the morning. Both of us found it mildly amusing that the men he was meeting viewed my presence in his life as proof of his reluctance to reckon with the truth of his sexuality. He'd started "seeing" someone, also named Paul, who worked at Bloomingdale's. Once when I was on the Upper East Side I stopped by the store to check out this other Paul, the only man working in cosmetics, Paul (my Paul) had said. There he was, slender, quietly good-looking, surrounded by the beautiful colors of perfectly made up women in ads promoting Elizabeth Arden products. I remembered hearing that he'd been flown to Europe to do makeup for the Elizabeth Taylor film *Ash Wednesday* and felt ridiculously impressed. As always, jealousy was an erotic stimulus, but one that had its downside: too much focus on the allure of male bodies for male bodies left me feeling drab and dated.

Theoretically freed for my own adventures, in fact I knew I couldn't hold a woman the way I wanted while he and I were still together. It came down to that. To touch her, heat her, kiss her everywhere, knead her hard between the legs until she came—and that was my main idea, to satisfy a woman—all seemed to depend on my willingness to pledge my troth to womankind. With Nadine it had been otherwise; she'd made the rules, and they weren't political. But now it wasn't merely a question of some random love affair, and I couldn't bear the negative judgment of the group. I wouldn't risk being interpreted as a trifler, a tourist of desire.

If the world of women was a cloister, my vocation was growing on me. It helped that feminists seemed to like my writing. I was elated when Audre Lorde, then poetry editor of the lesbian magazine *Amazon Quarterly*, accepted a submission. In October I got a letter from a Park Slope poet, Marge Bannerman, who invited me to join a group of "serious feminist writers" who'd be meeting regularly to discuss one another's work. Leslie Kaplow had recommended me.

I went to readings and literary parties featuring semifamous poets: Alta in a top hat and lipstick, Pat Parker in tight white jeans, both briefly in from the Bay Area. Alta had printed a poem of mine in a little saddle-stitched magazine she ran, and I introduced myself, secure in the thought that she'd already recognized my claim to be a poet. (It seemed to me in those days that the statement "I'm a writer," unless accompanied by some sort of proof, would mark the speaker as a probable impostor.) She was gracious enough, but plainly had no idea who I was.

Somewhat crestfallen, I went to a party in her honor, an improvised affair with invitation by word of mouth. I hoped I hadn't written down the wrong address as I lingered nervously among the trash bins on Bowery near Houston, trying to figure out how to gain access to the oasis of light above. Some idlers I hadn't liked the looks of kindly told me what to do: "Give a yell, the buzzer doesn't work." Feeling pessimistic, hating to advertise my exclusion, I nonetheless followed their advice and was miraculously admitted. At the top of a flight of dirty stairs, I entered a loft space full of visual drama, of music and wine and warmth and food and talk. As advertised,

the party was women only.

Soon I was eyeing Audre, in a head tie and flowing tunic, conversing gravely in a corner with her friend Adrienne, whom I knew by this time to be *one of us*, though I'd had my doubts when I'd first heard of her. It was Dr. Beck who'd thought I might be interested in some poems of hers, excerpted from a forthcoming collection, that had just been printed in one of the snobby-literate magazines he kept on the coffee table in his waiting room. How radical could she be? had been my reasoning. It was like having your mother recommend a rock band. Now I'd not only heard her read from the book, none other than the astonishing *Diving into the Wreck*, but was rubbing elbows with her. (I didn't tire of such comparisons, of measuring my progress. Up from Portland, where culture was just a rumor!) This loft, with its buzz of politics and art, was part of the downtown scene Kate Millett wrote about. This was the longed-for center, this was my kind of fame, which had nothing to do with Jacqueline Onassis or the Zipless Fuck on Eighty-first Street.

I was too proud to hover around the "heavies," but just being close was cause for optimism and renewed my energy for the dread social effort. I talked with writers I'd never heard of (but they really were writers) about the advantages of publishing one's work with a small feminist press instead of a commercial one. I slow-danced clasping women whose bodies would wander back to me when I was home in Flushing masturbating.

In October I decided to move out. Paul was tenderly regretful; so was I. We'd both known it was coming. Marge's writing group began meeting around that time. All white women in our twenties and thirties, most at some stage of emergence from the chrysalis of heterofeminism, we decided to call ourselves Seven Women Poets. Marge invited me to dinner—alone. She made no secret of her attraction to Madeleine, the one of the seven whose poetry was weaker than her lesbian credentials; not only was Maddy a dyke from way back but a smoldering butch whose world-weary air (aging Werther with a hard-on and a wisecrack at the ready) I already saw could be pretty devastating. I, on the other hand, tried to give no hint of my feelings for my hostess, detected days before and resurgent now as I cut up vegetables for salad in the kitchen of her elegant, cramped apartment high in a brownstone near Flatbush Avenue, a corner house with the great luxury of windows on three sides. "You get this marvelous Brooklyn light," she explained. We drank red wine and traded insights about the writing group, and about a memorial reading for Anne Sexton, whose recent suicide was being interpreted as a dire portent for creative women.

I summarized my checkered erotic past. "But my life seems to be moving in a certain direction," I told her.

"It sure does!" She laughed. Earlier, when she'd approached me about the group and I'd felt compelled to warn her I wasn't a dyke exactly (though not exactly not one, and entirely sympathetic), she'd offered a sort of tactless absolution: "If you live with a man, that's your problem."

Marge, like Nadine, was about ten years my senior. She was bringing up a sullen daughter, age eight. In those years it seemed that all daughters were sullen and all mothers struggling and cranky and sort of glamorous but sort of appalling in their quotidian martyrdom. White feminism would shortly get around to remythifying the

joys of motherhood, but for now, women like Marge who'd had their kids in a different life were nearly swamped by propaganda for the advantages of soaring unencumbered.

Much later, still high on wine, I agreed with Marge that it was late to think of schlepping off to Queens and accepted her invitation to stay over. Even when she indicated I might share her double bed in the alcove off the living room, I wasn't sure what was going to happen next. She got out two flannel nightgowns, handed me one, slipped hers modestly over her head before undressing underneath. She turned out the light, I lay there, she reached out. Did she say, "Is this all right?" or, "We *could* just go to sleep." The good feminist, presuming nothing.

Pressing against her in the deep bed, I laughed to myself, remembering that notebook still with plenty of blank pages. Then I was only thinking *yes, yes, it's like this*, cupping the heat of her mound, the ever so slightly abrasive hairs. The wetness nested there, surprise impossible with men. Luxuriant ass weighing heavy on my palms as I bent my mouth to her. (Later, she told me I was "easy to make love with." Nadine had said this too. I wondered what they meant.)

The first time I wasn't able to come, though I answered in the ambiguous negative when she conscientiously whispered, "Did I stop too soon?" It hardly mattered, for I'd entered the arc of her desire, felt her powerless, at last, to keep herself from pleasure. Our next encounter was more reciprocal.

Euphoria, then doubt. Were we having an affair? I found it disconcertingly hard to tell. I was "crazy in love with her," I decided, but Marge was a busy woman, rushing from child to teaching job to friends to poetry. She kept hoping to seduce the elusive Madeleine, who pined for some manipulative brunette with varnished looks that suggested terms like "dame" and "broad."

In truth, Marge and I were almost comically mismatched. She couldn't be monogamous, she claimed. I, who'd resolved not to replicate with women the patterns that had made me feel so trapped with men, kept falling in love and lusting after easeful permanence.

The friend of Jonathan's who'd first told me about the Women's School let me crash with her and her roommate while I looked for a place to rent. Their dark, skinny apartment on Prospect Park West seemed to stretch miles from front to back. I used the kitchen almost furtively, aware of infringing on other people's space. I was sleeping in the living room near the household stereo, and practically memorized Alix Dobkin's "Lavender Jane Loves Women" album. "Any woman can be a les-bi-an, les-bi-an," ran the refrain of one song. Intentionally provocative, it also seemed true. Not that I thought most women would make the effort (not that I wished they would—the cloister would get too crowded). But the song reflected the proselytizing stance that was popular with lesbian activists at that time. It was the flip side of Kate Millett's anguished disavowal of bisexuality, the idea that loving another woman was simply a better deal (why sleep with your oppressor?) and civic-minded to boot (sisterhood will harness your libido). It had the democratic virtue of inclusivity, the wisdom of which was apparent as converts swelled the ranks.

For the first time, I'd gained access to a social universe (not just a fantasy island, as with Nadine and Laurann) that made desire for women seem perfectly logical,

while enveloping it in an atmosphere of legend as compelling as the heterosexual tales that had grounded my ambivalent attractions to men. Logic and legend together made my dykehood feel real, more so the more I lived it out. And it wasn't just a matter of what I did in bed; I was slaking my thirst for "women in multiples," reveling in the play of shifting alliances, the layerings of beauties and talents, ironies of perspective. If I'd entered an enclosure, the cloister garden I'd envisioned, what lay inside its walls felt simply infinite. The whole shimmering fabric of our connected womanhood was erotic to me, was part of what I touched in making love to Marge. I'd glimpsed some of this in Learning Community days, but merely as a private revelation. Now I was sharing it with multitudes.

Alix's song was about overcoming false consciousness. It said one's most authentic wants could be discovered, cultivated. It encouraged me to think that my history with men was no barrier to proclaiming, "I am a lesbian."

Sometimes, looking back, I think what I did was like marrying simply in order to get laid. What if I'd waited, cleaved to complexities? Fat chance. I'd fallen madly for a gender.

All my life I'd had problems with People in Groups. Now I wanted to belong. I said, "I do."

I looked at one apartment on Ocean Avenue where the white landlady wanted my assurance that I wouldn't acquire a Black or Puerto Rican roommate, and though the likelihood seemed minimal (I wasn't meeting women of color then; "the community" was white, my coworkers were all white, I don't recall a single person who wasn't white at the New York Women's School), I told her off. Where were *they* supposed to live, I asked. She said *they'd* taken over everything already. Belatedly, a frightening thought struck her; she followed me out, screaming, "Are you from the En Ay Ay Cee Pee, are you from the En Ay Ay Cee Pee?"

I rented a floor-through in an eight-family building in the South Slope one block from Prospect Park. I owned almost no furniture, and retained the services of a greenish foldout couch the prior occupant had left. It shed a fine yellow dandruff on the floor, whose boards were covered in old linoleum. The stove was ancient, grease-clogged; I wiped roach shit from the cupboards. The kitchen window, which gave onto the fire escape, was secured against forced entry (and exit, in case of fire) with that staple of tenement living, a padlocked accordion gate. Through this barrier, when spring came around, I'd admire apple blossoms in the junk-filled yard below.

The rent, slightly under two hundred a month, was a lot for me to handle on my pay at Scholastic. I'd planned to get a roommate, but couldn't stomach it in a railroad flat whose layout defeated the possibility of real privacy. I decided I could afford to live alone. I rattled around all winter, having wistful adventures at the Duchess and Bonnie and Clyde's, two lesbian bars in the Village, as Seven Women Poets devolved merrily into a women-only ménage à *n*. (I ached for Madeleine at unavailing length; Marge dallied with Jill; Jill and Mara fell in love and lasted several months, while Mara and Madeleine, who were just friends, rented an apartment together and ended up not speaking. We kept the workshop going, somehow focusing on craft despite all the rivalry, erotic and literary. We even gave a reading at the Women's Coffeehouse. It was exhausting, glorious. I wouldn't repeat it for anything.) I left my single mattress

and box spring on the floor, papered grimy walls above my writing desk with rejection notes from magazines and publication contests. I was sending around a poetry manuscript entitled *If You Live*.

Up close, the lesbian cloister looked like turf I recognized, intricate and bumpy, full of gray areas. Some days just had to be gotten through. Then I'd make discoveries, feel a surge of vigor, while life kept leaking out the way it does, its sinister finitude always on the edge of consciousness.

Still, it was *my* life now: Lesbian poet. New York writer. I'd made my bed and meant to lie in it. As usual, I thought that if I waited patiently, the loneliness might part and vouchsafe me a vision.

SEVEN

Fish Without Bicycles

The kind of lesbian that I am is something new, something that has to be defined, made. There is a social opportunity for this now that there probably never was before. And I am very thankful, because it seems to me now that in loving women is my only chance for intense sexuality without violating the rest of my life. Perhaps my only chance for intense sexuality at all. . . . For me, it is so far the most intense experience of what Jung would call the process of individuation. That is: no answers.

—Journal entry, February 1, 1975

A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.

—Feminist aphorism

“WANT TO SIT DOWN and rest for a few minutes?”

It was a Saturday in June, most lushly womanly of months, and Leslie Kaplow and I had been walking in Prospect Park, our talk of feminist poetry and feminist politics modulated by a running exchange of biographical details symptomatic of our undeclared courtship. Absorbed in the conversation, I only now saw that we’d strayed into Brooklyn’s nearest equivalent to country privacy, a small hollow beneath trees, screened by a modest hill from the Little League crowds, yet public enough to be reasonably safe. Around us the hardwoods were coming into meaty fullness, leaving off spring’s subtle riot of greens for a soberer and more regimented forest hue, a case of the theme succeeding its variations. Wafting toward us from the Long Meadow came the scent of mown grass, the mutter of recreation. My eyes felt itchy from seasonal allergies, but it wasn’t too hot—not yet. This year marked my second time experiencing the east’s Ferris wheel swoop from brutal chill to languid swelter, and the haste of it still felt almost violent. The park must have doubled its weight in leaves since April.

I sat cross-legged on the sparse grass. Leslie lowered herself beside me, then lay back, her legs outstretched, head pillowed on my thigh. This arrangement felt slightly

awkward, but that didn't bother me. My one concern was to make her comfortable so she wouldn't move away.

Miraculously, she lay there and we kept conversing calmly, as though we didn't both grasp the crucial nature of this moment. After a minute or two I laid a hesitant palm on the soft brown curls above the high forehead. I stroked her hair, kept talking, thinking exultantly of evening. Her daughter, Les had informed me, would be sleeping at a friend's house. I'd eagerly agreed to accompany her to a performance of *It's All Right to Be Woman Theater*.

It wasn't what I'd expected—that she'd make the first move, yet put herself, as it seemed, in my hands. To me she was still the teacher, the older woman (she was thirty, I was twenty-five), the proud possessor of lesbian seniority. She was the one with the doctorate (in American Studies), the child (Emma, just shy of five), the automobile (a scruffy Dodge Dart). She was a New Yorker born and bred, and though she couldn't technically call herself a red diaper baby, her family had traveled in left-leaning circles. While I did alienated labor for my paycheck from Scholastic, she threw herself into a movement job as assistant director of the Women's Center of Brooklyn College. Her work made concrete changes in real women's lives: she organized coming-out workshops and reproductive health panels, she counseled battered women, she accepted invitations to speak to psychology classes so that straight college students could see for themselves that a lesbian wasn't a mythical beast.

After my move to Brooklyn, we'd renewed the acquaintance begun in her Women's School class so many months ago. She'd been enthusiastic about my new work, poems composed since joining Seven Women Poets. I'd slipped them into her mailbox in the hope of getting published in the anthology of contemporary lesbian poetry that she and Marge were co-editing. I was overjoyed that she deemed me enough of a peer to discuss this project with me, and to ask for my opinion on drafts of the poetry reviews she'd been writing for the Manhattan women's paper, *Majority Report*. There was talk of a cooperative self-publishing scheme whereby Marge, Les, and I, together with Mara from the poetry group, would issue our poetry books under a common imprint. This plan would give each writer or editor control of her own project while averting the stigma of vanity publication; we would share distribution and publicity efforts.

What with Emma's early bedtime and other constraints of motherhood, discussions of these matters usually meant my dropping by Les's humid top-floor apartment on Third Street. I remember only snatches of those crepuscular interviews: a Bonnie Raitt record low on the stereo, a naked girl-child's skinny sprint from bath to television, a dish of Breyer's peach ice cream, an ambiguous hug good-bye. (I was still nursing my crush on the teacher, but after a winter of romantic disappointments didn't dare to get my hopes up.) Wanting to display my sensitivity, but also truly curious, I'd inquired into the mysteries of single parenthood. "It can be hard," was the answer I got, "but Emma sort of takes care of me too sometimes."

I pieced together a picture of Les's origins. A child of lower-middle-class parents with recent roots in Eastern Europe, she'd grown up in the Bronx, a member of the upwardly mobile, white ethnic masses that the city university system routinely subjected to speech instruction meant to reform the despised New York accent. She

wore her ethnicity with the diffidence of those secular New Yorkers who, far from the Christian heartland, grow up regarding their Jewishness as rather ordinary, as no more remarkable, say, than the local tradition of suspending alternate side of the street parking rules for Purim and Sukkot. She spoke of her academic training, her dissertation on Malcolm Cowley, and what sounded like a singularly bloodless marriage to Emma's father, Artie Kaplow, a chemistry professor, in much the same tone I took toward my own prelesbian years: with a touch of cynicism, but really as something too remote, too little relevant to her feminist activist present, to occasion deep regret or lasting anger. It was common wisdom among lesbian feminists that we so-called "man-hating dykes" were really far less enraged at men than were a lot of straight women. After all, we didn't have to sleep with them, and even those of us who weren't explicit separatists usually managed to transact a major portion of life's business in woman-friendly settings.

Now she lay with her head in my lap, and the admission this implied, after weeks of indirection, felt stunningly intimate—the *great rejoicing*, I'd written, *of finding something that seemed lost, of touching something that seemed forbidden, removed forever*. That night we held hands while waiting on line to get into the theater performance, and I felt the old twinge of self-consciousness, mingled with shy pride, at the public display. It seemed like an announcement, committing me to something. The all-female audience, which contained familiar faces, including former members of our Women's School class, gave me my first taste of being an official item in the fishbowl we were getting used to dignifying with the monolithic title of the Women's Community.

The show that night was good-natured, highly creative agitprop, all the more enjoyable for feeling homemade, openly defiant of the standards and methods of professional, male-dominated theater. I remember almost nothing of the substance, but I do recall a cranky. A common accessory to political street theater in those days, it was a sort of continuous mural, painted on butcher paper and scrolled around two long sticks. As helpers "cranked" the mural, slowly revealing successive frames, the actors would illustrate the contents. I also recall an opening song—"It's all right to be woman . . . big belly, rough hands, sore back," something like that. It sounds simple enough, even simpleminded, an easy mark for snickering putdowns of "seventies feminism" (I Am Woman, Hear Me Roar), but it didn't come off that way. Instead it seemed that all of us there, actors and audience, were discovering something we couldn't have known so deeply without this collective emotional experience. We were acknowledging, together, with humor and anger, how deeply un-all right being woman has always been. What might have come across as cant a couple of years later (and would likely have faced the apt criticism that "woman" exists in the heroic singular only in the minds of white, middle-class feminists) was hard-won truth in June 1975.

Afterward, Leslie and I took the subway back to Brooklyn. We headed for Third Street, having agreed already—laughing self-consciously, wanting to have it settled—to spend the night together. Les put a record on her stereo, one of a group of female vocalists she fancied. In that era before the heyday of "wimmin's music," her favorites were on the country-and-western end of rock, protofeminist in their lyrics. She put her arms around me, and we danced, clumsy with uncertainty and longing.

Soon she led me through Emma's room, booby-trapped with playthings, to her own over-the-stairs cubbyhole with its window framing a nineteenth-century view of flat roofs and a silhouetted steeple. Deep in the night, she turned to me, and said, "It's been so long since I've had to use the second pillow."

I felt what I always feel when I'm in love, what I never get tired of feeling: that to be alone, so private, in the night with just *this other* is impossible good luck, a mysterious lapse in life's austerity program, perhaps to be paid for later. Her body came to me then as recompense for deprivations that might have commenced prenatally, so familiar did they feel. Would I forego the comfort to be spared the need for it? I couldn't say. Like being born, it strikes me as one of those things it's just as well to have no choice about.

Since my few-nights' stand with Marge over six months ago, I'd been mucking around in a slough of frustration. My recent erotic adventures fell into two categories. On one hand, I hankered for women who didn't want me. After Marge, I'd suffered humiliating tortures over Madeleine, a marvel of passive aggression, to whom I'd offered myself as bluntly as I dared, getting nothing for my pains but a sleepless night on her couch, one cynical kiss in her car while the engine ran, and some fevered lyrics for my new manuscript, which was called *After Touch*. Alternatively, I'd tried to make do with nice women I didn't want.

It was as though, now that I was acclimating to another gender, I had to review all over again the difference between finding people attractive in theory and actually lusting after them. My artist-poet friend Liz and I had fooled around one winter night, and I'd been dismayed by how badly that had gone. Touching her felt somehow incestuous, suffocating, much though I admired from afar her cropped hair and old-fashioned face, an Irish Catholic face on a militant anti-imperialist. I thought her fetching when, a little high, she enacted at parties a kinetic lip-synched version of the Supremes' erotic agony, *O, baby love*, her little mouth like a puncture wound. But she was, I decided, a sister, not a lover.

For some weeks in spring I'd consorted with a pale-fleshed innocent named Tish, who was fresh off the boat from the heartland. We'd picked each other up at the Duchess. Barely a feminist, clingy and wistful, she had come to New York to be a lesbian, but seemed overwhelmed by the project, inclined to throw herself on my mercy. I found her boring "as a person," as they say, but rather liked her in bed, a discovery that filled me with guilty, rakish glee. I imagined I was using her as a man might, or a butch. Once, drunk, I moaned *I love you* when I came; after that, I realized I'd better break it off. Next I started spending ambiguous time with yet another acquaintance from the Women's School: Bea, with big brown eyes and overalls, a short upper lip like the little princess in *War and Peace*, and the sexless cuteness of a glossy, dark-furred mammal. She was very nice and had good politics, and I felt apologetic that we didn't go to bed, though possibly she was as relieved as I when we stopped calling each other.

So much for my brave notion, floated two years before, that my relationships to women might take a completely different shape from my exclusivity with men. I was after a "one and only," and principles be damned—though when Leslie came along I tried to slow things down a little. We both did, we thought it was good for us, a sign

of maturity to schedule nights apart, wryly referred to as “enforced celibacy.”

Besides, I was sensitive to public opinion. Liz, for instance, apprised of developments, looked dubious and indicated that it was all very well if what one wanted was monogamy. She was getting more politically serious, hanging out with the heavies at the New York Women’s School, women from Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, as stern as Jacobins, who’d staged a coup and now ran the place. In the time-honored fashion of sectarians everywhere, they’d made short work of anyone whose program differed by a comma from theirs (*Live like her, Madame Binh, A luta continua, Support the Republic of New Afrika*). Unwilling to argue with them, Les sensibly steered clear. I found it harder to keep my distance, in part because I agreed with much of PFOC’s analysis and couldn’t resist (though I feared) their purity. They were clearly prepared to sacrifice more than I, a credential that lures me time and time again, no matter how I bridle at the self-righteousness and rigidity of vision that tend to accompany it. It’s always the same story with me and absolutist politics. I’m the cautious moth that hangs around the candle, gets lightly scorched but declines to be immolated.

From Liz I gathered they saw monogamy as a disease of capitalism, a view hardly original with them, and one I thought had its merits but was far too greedy for happiness to heed.

Memories of those first months. The sensation of being *in* a lover’s body: I don’t mean only literally, but as though her flesh and bone were my horizon, my total environment. Lying down and having hours disappear, time stretched, compressed, in unaccustomed ways. Always, afterward, a quaint surprise to check the clock.

Losing the sense of an ending. “I can’t stop.” Or: “Is it all right if we stop?” Because (she showed me) we could go on and on, pleasure becoming other than *pleasure*, the way, when I saw the mountains in Alaska, I had to ask myself if this was really *beauty*, if *beauty* wasn’t rather beside the point.

Her generous breasts, resented by their owner (not for her my insouciant bralessness), I found glorious. Her gesture, dressing, tucking them away (“the girls,” we called them, both hers and mine), shrugging impatiently to settle them in their places—so little self-tenderness she had. Then slipping on a pastel cotton print top, an Indian import purchased on the Lower East Side, where she taught me to shop on the Sundays of our freedom, precious days when Emma’s father picked her up at nine and we’d take the train to the city, as we say in the outer boroughs. There was a Sunday half fare then; you paid on the trip out, receiving a transfer that let you return for free. We’d both reached adulthood with basically Depression-era values and relished the minuscule savings.

She wore those cotton tops over faded Wrangler jeans. I can see her in one the color of orange sherbet, soft from many washings. Her hair too, then, was soft, a femmy touch, allowed the length to curl mildly over ears and neck, presenting a contrast to her sturdy features—decisive nose, imposing forehead, unmistakably hers even in baby pictures, which show her absurdly, endearingly posed like a bald future statesman in a pinafore—that seemed more in line with her “masculine” body language. (How to describe these attributes as I saw them, attractive womanly combinations? Is the scandal of “mannishness”—as the gender police would have it—

simply that of a woman unwomanned by dress and carriage? Isn't it, rather, that she *remains a woman*, despite her defiance of all-important rules that delimit the category?) Of course she didn't wear makeup; none of us did then, ever. She didn't shave her legs, but they were elegantly smooth. A few stray hairs below the knee could be easily overlooked. I was the one with the shockingly hairy calves, which throughout my adult life I've maintained in an unimproved state that I never cease to feel panicky about when the gender police are looking.

What did it signify that, in later years, she cut her hair severely shorter, adopted a more consistently butch wardrobe of T-shirts, turtlenecks, solid-color tank tops? as though the abundant hair, the shirt with its gathered yoke, smacked impermissibly of prettiness. Does the change, a subtle one, hint at increased disdain for any concession to "femininity," to the openness, the luxuriant side of her that could flower, too, in sex? It suggests to me a mistrust of contradiction, a will to shape and discipline the world, starting with her own body. But maybe she'd argue that the softness I recall was itself a concession to gender policing—via the world's opinions, the mirror's tyranny, a conventional mother's early panic at a daughter's boyishness. Internalized oppression is a complicated business. Maybe it just took that long to say fuck it, ditch the last trappings of Park Slope housewifery, cut her hair short enough that the ladies in their pumps, clutching their purses, fussing with tinted curls, would do a double take when she entered a public rest room.

What do I know? I've lived differently with my so different gender sorrows, my thirty years' war with what I'm supposed to look like, inveterate delight in a clean summer tonsure, scalp shining through the stubble and on the street the other day a woman stopped and asked was I a Buddhist? (Yet always the dangly earrings insist I'm a girl.) I know my own contempt of cosmetics and frills, time and money squandered on mere appearance, the aggression I nurse behind the implicit challenge: this is my body, take it or leave it. (But still I extract, with tweezers, behind closed doors, eight stubborn beard hairs and portions of a mustache; I step on the scale each morning upon arising.) I can only say I liked that early softness.

Leslie planned to take a week's vacation in August, when Emma would be staying with her father, and asked if I'd like to go camping in New England. That's when I found out about the psychic complications that lurked beneath her businesslike, highly competent demeanor. A few days before the trip she panicked, confessed she wasn't sure she could handle a week away from work and her daily routines, a week in the woods with me. I had to rush to Third Street late at night to reassure her. I was unprepared for what I managed to pry out of her: she feared the emotional chaos she thought might descend if she ceased to function (even for a week!) at top efficiency in the highly structured setting afforded by her job and life with Emma.

I was alarmed but secretly not entirely displeased. Here was a challenge suited to my talents. All I had to do was convince her to relax, not go rigid at the prospect of letting me in a little. All I had to do was show her she could trust me. And I sensed she could be persuaded. (Of course I had no qualms about my own trustworthiness.) It gratified me—more than that, fulfilled a long-standing fantasy—to imagine myself in the role of rescuer of this woman I perceived as both admirably strong and achingly vulnerable.

We left for points north, I sporting the radical stubble of my shortest haircut to date. Somewhere on the New England Thruway we had a scary blowout, the tire reduced to what looked like the shreds of a burst balloon scattered up and down the highway. The state trooper who pulled up while Les was putting on the spare (a simple skill I disproportionately admired) cheered me by mistaking me for a boy. At the campsite in New Hampshire we had a major fight, partly about why she wouldn't say "I love you," and stayed in the tent for hours the following morning making up wordlessly. We then showed up at a rural diner at some impossibly late hour, requiring eggs and home fries, I with one eye swelled shut from an insect bite. We swam in tidy lakes and fought again because we had to stop in Maine so she could go to May Sarton's on an academic errand involving someone's dissertation. (I moaned about feeling like a poor relation, a dropout, a humble prole among the pros.) By the time we returned to Brooklyn, certain things had gotten settled. Most importantly, we'd dispensed with the taboo against talking as though our romance might possibly have a future.

In August, I flew west and came out to my mother, who seemed, as I'd expected, toughened against the shock by all the sexual slings and arrows I'd flung her way in years gone by. I left it up to her to tell my father.

I wrote to Leslie as often as I could manage and still appear, as we said jokingly, "mature and independent." On the Oregon coast, I bought her a beautiful silver ring and mailed her a funny postcard—a photograph of a heap of half-opened razor clams, a dead ringer for pussy-in-a-shell.

"What will Emma think about my being here?" I'd asked, maybe the second time I slept over at the Third Street apartment. I already had my eye on the long haul. Les, who'd recently been in several brief relationships with triangular complications, answered blithely, "Oh, probably nothing much. She'll probably just want you to read a story to her or something." In later years we often reminisced about the laughable inadequacy of our planning for the overwhelming task of coparenting, a project that combined the well-advertised pitfalls of stepfamilies with the murky challenge of raising a child in a lesbian feminist partnership. As if it wasn't bad enough that I could have no legal guarantee for my connection to Emma, our relationship was constantly undermined by the lack of social support for it. Within "the community," kids were still something of an exotic item; outside it, our family was either invisible or a scandal. This was long before Heather acquired two mommies; we lacked even the language to describe who Emma and I were to each other. As she and I grew closer, it rankled that her father, who took a minimal hand in her routine care, was seen by the world as crucial in her life, while my role went unacknowledged.

Emma's presence figured significantly in her mother's and my decision, made in the winter following the summer of our courtship, to move in together. I'd begun to resent the amount of time I spent on their turf, an arrangement prompted by the difficulty of entertaining a child away from home. In truth, however, this spatial difficulty was only symptomatic: even though Les's impressive adult credentials, from mommyhood to doctorate, were part of what had drawn me to her, I now fretted at the imbalance they created. I resented being the one to have to fit into her life, her schedule. I found it next to impossible to be a gracious third party to the difficult yet

endurable alliance of an only child and a single parent.

In my first few months with Les, I'd vicariously sampled the mysteries of that setup, had observed how triage becomes a way of life. I knew how she rushed to get away from work and make it to day care by six o'clock; I'd watched her let herself be wheedled into a candy store treat to fuel the trek to Herzog's Delicatessen, where she'd buy whatever seemed easy, cooked chicken or cold cuts, something for a five-year-old to pick at between hits of sugar. She'd get Emma settled while fixing her own dinner, some hasty combination of protein and vegetables. Eat it on the living room couch, off the wooden crate that served as a dining table, Emma seated cross-legged on the stylish, grimy rug, a remnant of brownstoning days. Wipe up spills. Tweeze splinters out of feet ("I told you not to go barefoot on this floor"). Supervise bath, toothbrushing, bedtime's rituals of delay. Get waked up nearly every night to provide reassurance. Locate, every morning, socks and underpants for two amid formidable disorder ("I'm messy like my mommy," Emma once told me proudly). Cope with evil dreams and stomach flu, fevers and rashes of unknown provenance. And how do you entertain an only child all day on Saturday, and still have time to be an editor and writer?

Emma possessed a strength of character often lacking in more cheerful, accommodating children. A somber streak belied real resilience. I remember her as a fairly social girl, always with a couple of friends her own age and attention from a variety of adults, a number of whom, in that child-sparse environment, went out of their way to befriend her. Yet I see her hanging back, watching things, her blue eyes ringed by the worried shadows that grown-ups deem unchildlike.

Leslie clearly wasn't a gung ho nurturer, and Emma was temperamental, often sulking or exploding, but they clung to each other with a dogged loyalty that wasn't to be challenged. As Les and I would say of our own connection later on, they'd "been through thin and thin together"; I couldn't compete with that. Still, I felt I would count for more with Emma, and consequently feel less resentful (less—let's face it—like the pouting sibling rival to my own lover's daughter), the more I developed an independent relationship with her. And that, I thought, would come more easily if Leslie and I merged our households.

These stated reasons for our move—for, in effect, our marriage—were sensible enough, but only part of the story. My motives were many, inconsistent. Did I fear that my lover and her daughter would get away from me if I didn't bind them to me? I know that the hardships of their situation made me yearn to shelter them. I had wildly mixed feelings about family life, yet I wanted to get inside, to feel included. I was drawn to mothers, to being a mother's suitor-savior (three of my four female lovers had been mothers of young daughters), and also drawn to mothering a child. I thought of it as a chore, a sacrifice, and an experience I couldn't afford to pass up. It seemed like a gauntlet thrown down before my claim to womanhood, a gender challenge I couldn't dismiss with quite the casualness of my stance toward sexual conventions.

Viewed from another angle, my plunge into family was only one of several large changes I made at twenty-five. Not only did I become an instant flommy—the word Les and I coined for my relationship to Emma—but I self-published my first book. *After Touch* appeared in the fall; in late winter the three of us moved to the ground floor of a limestone on Sixth Street, the first of three apartments we'd share over the

next dozen years. In those same months, Les and I and another couple founded an ambitious literary magazine. From the energy with which I abruptly tackled my own transgressive version of all the adult commitments, you'd almost think I was trying to compensate for my years of preferring not to.

It's a strange thing to grow into life with a child, to start out defended and wary and win your way nearer to the feelings of belonging that biological families supposedly inherit as a mystery of blood. I wish I could have known from the beginning how much I'd love Emma later—that we, too, would stick together through thin and thin. Maybe that would have helped me relax into the job. As it was, home often seemed like a place of madly competing needs—Emma's need for attention and physical care, my need for solitude and adult time with Leslie, Les's need for me, for relief from parenting chores, for time to do her work. Her frankness about feeling trapped by motherhood was a boon to me insofar as it justified my own ambivalence. Ambivalent or not, we still had to cope with Emma's tantrums and tension headaches, with getting her to school and home from day care afterward, with making breakfast and lunch and dinner, with setting limits, rationing sugar, chaperoning sleepovers, buying clothes, arranging trips to the beach, the zoo, the movies, seeing that homework got done, attending parent-teacher night (the teachers coped tactfully with the anomaly of my presence).

Early on, Emma and I had a dramatic power struggle. I recall in particular one dreadful session where I forcibly bathed her, holding her down and removing her clothes when she refused to do it herself, slapping her on her pale bony bottom, my crime confirmed by the lingering crimson palm print. I learned an important lesson: don't hit. But I still hadn't a clue about how to manage her, or my own rage when one of her tantrums descended, inexorable as some outsize meteorological event, effectively disrupting all surrounding activity for the unpredictable duration. Often her child's emotions humbled me, bringing me face to face with my own childishness, with feelings that mocked my cherished pretensions to maturity and control.

Although Les and I had agreed on separate bedrooms (they doubled as offices), I felt I had too little space. Dismayed at the way in which my life now revolved around other people's schedules and emotions, I was also ashamed of my self-centeredness, my reluctance to embrace the common woman's lot of devotion to others. I consulted a therapist, told her I thought of leaving, used the sessions as a way to convince myself to stay. I'd already said enough goodbyes to last a lifetime. I hoped things would get easier.

Our life as three certainly did improve with practice, yet I can't help thinking now that Les and I sometimes cheated our daughter (and ourselves) by treating daily life as a resented obligation. We took turns with Emma, trying to give her what she needed, but we didn't have a lot of fun at it. What Leslie and I enjoyed were the adult activities of subverting the social order, honing language, theorizing. Domesticity was bread and water, what you got through so you could go out and play with the big feminists.

Sometimes I thought that there was something wrong with our attitude, but I never did anything about it. I was too guilty about my own less than inspired mothering, too invested in my role of rescuer, too used to viewing life as an endurance contest. Nor

was I eager to go against Les's clear reluctance to have large areas of her feeling-life questioned. Why was she so bitterly rebellious against the mother role, why could she find no joy in it? Why did she go to such lengths to avoid any but the most formal, bureaucratic dealings with her ex-husband, disdaining even the minimal show of cooperation that might have eased things for Emma? Why did she refuse to interact with relatives who looked harmless enough to me? These attitudes weren't to be discussed, it was not to be suggested that they were based on mutable, highly subjective reactions to real difficulties. It was as though to press the point would violate Les's emotional rights.

My discomfort with her touchiness developed gradually, as I grew to recognize the defects of her virtues. Anger at men, estrangement from biological family, a resentful sense that caring for others demanded too much sacrifice of self—all were common among the lesbians we knew and familiar in my own life. I prized the courage of Les's survivor stance, the clarity of her judgments. I defended her against people who thought her judgmental, went along with her division of the world into the trusted few to whom she displayed passionate loyalty and the many she had no time for. Being with her, on her side, made me feel clear and righteous, too; being first in her intimate circle made me feel special. The fact that her determined competence coincided with an air of brave beleaguerment made living with her strenuous but exciting. The starkness of it struck me as completely plausible.

It wasn't just my sense of familial duty that often wore me out in those years. There was also my duty to the world at large. I steeped myself in effortful good works, interviewing lesbian writers by mail for an article on "The Politics of Publishing and the Lesbian Community," joining other Brooklyn members of CARASA (Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse) in an attempt to move the citywide group in an anti-racist direction, attending marathon meetings of women from different groups like Wages for Housework and the Socialist Workers Party, who wanted to organize a Mother's Day demonstration but couldn't agree on "principles of unity." I accompanied Liz and the anti-imperialists to Philadelphia for a day of protest against the Bicentennial celebration. Les and I and Emma rose at dawn and piled onto a chartered bus to D.C. for a demonstration at the Supreme Court at the time of the Bakke affirmative action case. (*We won't go back, send Bakke back.* Famous last words.) "Life is hard," I told Emma when she kvetched; it gave me pause when I heard her repeat this maxim to her cat, Willa, the cranky tabby who acted out her angst by caroming around the apartment, her rough gray fur standing up as though she'd been petted against the grain.

I wasn't the only one rushing into stability. Despite Liz's scruples about monogamy, this was a closely coupled time, at least in the lesbian literary circles that increasingly shaped my sense of "the women's community." Many influential cultural institutions—presses, bookstores, magazines, including those that aspired to a collective structure—ran largely on the energies of women in pairs. ("Stability" was, however, far from an absolute state: breakups often severely stressed community-building efforts; even in cases that confirmed the happy legend of lesbian ex-lovers turning into friends, the transition was rarely completely frictionless.) Of course I don't mean that we thought of it this way, any more than heterosexuals tend to think of marriage as a means to

cheaper health insurance. We simply took it for granted that a literary *couple* enjoyed extra clout.

In letters as in life, Les and I and our friends saw ourselves as unprecedented, our identities ever under arduous construction. A critical mass of women-loving feminist literati simply hadn't existed before us, let alone a group like ours that combined a passion for art with a passion for social justice. Despite our contempt for the separatist fantasy that women could jettison "the prick in our heads" and start from scratch, we enjoyed a heady sense of being present at the creation—if not of a brand-new world, then of a radical new way of living in the old one. Thus anointed and burdened, we managed to reconcile our keen ambitions with the sobering knowledge that our chutzpadik dissent from both standard sex and standard politics virtually guaranteed our exile from official culture. (Fish without bicycles can kiss the mainstream good-bye.) At a time in which being an open lesbian was tantamount to renouncing all hope of having one's writing taken seriously by anyone but other lesbians, we trained to be secret leaders, guerrilla poets, public intellectuals whom the public had never heard of.

Leslie's and my involvement in editing, reviewing, writing, and the feminist small press movement played a part in creating the new lesbian literary culture, a culture that in turn shaped our family on both symbolic and material levels. With so many of our friends also involved in "lit biz" and organizing, there was never a clear-cut boundary between work and play, between the haven of home and the noisy arena of lesbian lefty politicking. The fact that we both did freelance work from the apartment (after leaving her Women's Center job, Les consulted on special programs for the New York City Board of Education) increased our shabby lair's resemblance to the type of eighteenth-century household that served as the center of a family's economic life. Whole rooms were given over to warehousing boxes of books and magazines. Emma grew up helping out with mailings, counting among her surrogate aunts lesbians whose writings would later be standard fare on the syllabi of her college women's studies courses. The feedback loop got increasingly convoluted as I wrote poems, stories, novels, and essays that drew on my home life, in part as a way of infusing families like ours with a social "realness" they'd hitherto lacked—then saw some of that writing become a lightning rod for the storms that raged among lesbian cultural politicians.

It was a life full of the tedious, repetitive tasks essential to small-press publishing and grassroots organizing, weirdly enlivened by intermittent ideological mayhem. Yet the frequent drudgery needs to be recalled in the context of the intellectual thrills that made the hardships bearable. Les and I, alongside the brilliant, plucky women who became our friends and colleagues, enjoyed in those years an enormous collective sense of possibilities.

That is not to say that we marched in lockstep. We were often competitive, sometimes quarrelsome, always ourselves. We came from many different backgrounds, and part of our idea was to work constructively with the implications of racial and other differences, and that is never a painless or uncontentious process. I simply mean we knew we were part of something that mattered. We felt it in our bones, in the excitement of our newness; we didn't have to see our names on a best-seller list (not that we wouldn't have loved it) to know what we were worth. We were

often weary but had more energy back when we thought the enemies were external. Before the feminist sex wars, the return of butch and femme, before the Brinks robbery and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Meese Commission pornography hearings. Before so many lovers parted, so many identities were claimed, before so many trashings and splits. Before the recovery movement and codependency, HIV and the Reagan revolution.

It was a time for starting all sorts of things. (It felt, in fact, like the early stages of a novel: options proliferate, characters abound, plotting yields an embarrassment of riches; only later will the author perceive the limitations imposed by decisions made at this euphoric moment.) The feminist small-press movement was going strong with Daughters in Vermont and the Women's Press Collective in California among the most influential new outfits. Many excellent writers were self-publishing. In those days before desktop, books didn't have to look so slick. I had prepared camera-ready copy for *After Touch* on an IBM Executive typewriter and created a simple cover using transfer lettering. Distribution, always the bugaboo of small presses, was labor-intensive but comparatively simple. It was possible to reach a core feminist audience through a finite number of women's and independent bookstores, plus mailings and appearances at conferences and book fairs.

In response to the success of our book publishing experiment, Les and I and Mara of Seven Women Poets, along with Mara's lover Leba, had decided to start our own "magazine of women's writing with an emphasis on writing by lesbians." We'd formed a casual couple friendship, and it seemed like a good idea over food and wine in Mara's plant-filled fourth-floor walk-up (on the stoop of which, many months later, heavy boxes filled with copies of our first issue would be deposited by a trucker who seemed very much put out not to find a loading dock). Mara and Leba (a student of Russian literature, soon to write her dissertation on the copy clerk in nineteenth-century fiction) were both excellent writers who shared Les's and my view that lesbian letters needed to develop a tradition of intelligent, responsible criticism. This project wasn't, as we saw it, about tearing women down, but about encouraging what was strongest in our nascent literature. We were tired of the anti-intellectual bias that equated close analysis and attention to craft with "patriarchal criticism." And we wanted no part of the separatist fantasies that were taking hold in certain quarters, one version of which surfaced in a vociferous campaign by June Arnold and Parke Bowman, co-proprietors of Daughters, to keep lesbians from publishing their books with "the boys." Bowman had come up with the appalling if catchy slogan "The Male Left is the same as the Male Right."

Les and I hoped that the magazine would serve not only as a showcase for good writing but as a counterweight to much fuzzy thinking we found reflected in the rising tide of so-called cultural feminism. We were adamant that "vision" could never replace organizing, that the actual circumstances of existing women's lives were more worthy of our attention than apocryphal tales of pre-historic matriarchies or blueprints for dyke utopias-to-be. The story of our clash with the infamous "seps" of western Massachusetts indicates something of the atmosphere in which we launched our publishing efforts.

When *After Touch* and its sister titles appeared, Leslie and Mara and Marge and I arranged to do a reading at the Lesbian Gardens Coffeehouse in Northampton. We

snickered among ourselves when we received publicity flyers setting forth a strict lesbians-only policy. How can they tell who's who? we quipped.

Leslie and I were staying with a friend of hers in Amherst. Mara and Marge had made their own arrangements, Marge with a friend who was not a lesbian. Les and I arrived early at the coffeehouse, wanting to check out the space and set up our book display. Two young women in crew cuts, wearing karate gis, were sparring over by the windows; the place was otherwise empty except for the woman we'd corresponded with about the reading. "They're practicing karate for the Dyke Patrol," she said.

"Really? In Northampton?" I asked, a touch too matronizingly. It was spring, Massachusetts was blooming, and to hardened Brooklynites looked irreproachably bucolic.

"There's been some street harassment," she explained. "We've got to defend ourselves."

Our audience trickled in and Mara showed up. Les and I bantered about where to find the groupies, or "guppies," as we called them. (It had become a standing joke that these appearances were more about crowd pleasing than poetic subtleties, and ought to command the amenities enjoyed by rock bands.) Hearing a commotion at the door, we discovered that Marge had arrived, accompanied by the friend in whose house she was staying. The doorkeeper said that the friend, who was known to the community as a heterosexual, couldn't enter. The friend then unhelpfully offered to kiss a woman.

Though less than charmed by her provocative stance, Mara, Leslie, and I felt we needed to intervene, especially because Marge was threatening not to read. The reading organizer said that the coffeehouse's status as a lesbian-only space had been spelled out clearly on the flyer. Our reply, that we hadn't taken the policy literally because "lesbian space" in New York simply meant an environment open to women who were comfortable being around a lot of dykes, didn't get us very far. The Dyke Patrol chased us down the stairs. We'd driven all that way for nothing.

At least it made a good story. We quickly realized that this was one of those times when the best means of preserving one's sanity is to sit back and try to be entertained by the dance of human folly. What we didn't know was that we were soon to be denounced in other terms that we would find it a lot harder to laugh off. That famous precept "the personal is political," once interpreted as encouragement to analyze women's emotional and sexual experiences for clues to gendered power dynamics, was now increasingly seen as an admonition to mend the world by reforming not only one's personal choices, but the very fabric of one's subjectivity. To use the telling phrase with which Adrienne Rich concludes "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," the good feminist's primary task was to "clean up her act."

In a taste of factional bloodletting to come, Leslie and I tangled with our coeditors before we'd even put out the first issue of our new magazine. The two of us had imagined our publication as a forum in which to connect fine poetry and fiction to the sort of left dyke politics that drew both of us. Mara and Leba accused us of proposing to sacrifice form to content, art to politics. Stung, we retorted that their approach would deny the possibility of exploring the relation between the two.

Positions on both sides were rather too reductive (and more than a shade ironic, as Mara's later writing career would be completely enmeshed with her plunge into

Jewish feminist organizing). We'd established, early on, a contentious atmosphere that worsened at a beach house in Amagansett. It was Mara's place, rented with precious money from a small writing grant, and Les and I had driven out there with Emma, who'd brought a friend along, for a weekend of editorial meetings and beach walks. My vision of a stunning full moon above the breakers, transforming the beach into a playland of delicate shadows, fuses with the memory of hours of arguments over whether a hypothetical piece on Susan Saxe, a lesbian antiwar organizer who'd been a fugitive and was now serving a prison sentence, would be appropriate for a literary magazine. Every hour or so either Les or I would have to stop the shouting to check on Emma and her playmate, who cavorted nervously around the edges of our hostilities. We four editors were like prospective parents who have a major falling-out before their kid is even born. But, amazingly, we managed to keep going, sustaining our increasingly successful publication through the misery of Mara and Leba's eventual breakup.

Around the time I moved in with Leslie and Emma, I drastically curtailed my writing about sex. No more private porn, no poems of raunchy longing; in my journal, a suspension of the once habitual dissections of my fantasy life, though occasionally there are clues. After a housewarming party for an ex-lover of Les's: "I like being in dark rooms packed with sweaty women who dance crotch to crotch. . . . I wonder if Leslie ever thinks about that kind of sex—the kind that is based on temptation, appearances. Probably not." My reticence wasn't driven by ideology, although I did concur in the lesbian feminist objection to the popular stereotype of dykes as hypersexual beings. (Les always used to say that her first task in talking to college classes about lesbianism was to disabuse them of the notion that her day revolved around putting on her boots and heading for the bar.) But just because we didn't flaunt it certainly didn't mean that Leslie and I and the women we hung out with weren't into exuberant lovemaking. (I remember sitting around with friends and having a good laugh about some purists who'd decided penetration was verboten.) Rather, I think I somehow assumed that now that I was in love with a woman, one with whom the sex had started out spectacularly, eros would take care of itself. I also think I didn't know how to square my new idea of myself as responsible lesbian citizen and parent with my history of sexual rebellion.

A poem from 1978 or 1979, entitled "impermanence," offers a sharp assessment of the compromise involved. The speaker describes how she and her lover "go about our busyness / stolid, unconscious, bourgeois as the cats, / more self-important with our politics." The couple are, she says, "too-civilized sisters scared of what we glimpsed / while flying eyeless by the instruments / into the nature-crazed interior / where pleasure equals anarchy and death." These lines seem to me a fair summary of the way in which both Leslie and I withdrew from the intensity and vulnerability we'd experienced in our first months as lovers. It states my awareness of the power of old forms to mold a supposedly radical lifestyle and suggests that the domestic life I'd chosen shared certain traits with the domesticity of my own childhood—foremost, a desire to mask the chaos that desire alludes to and invites: "dear apparition, semi-solid sweet," the speaker at last directly addresses her lover, "the rooms are rented, and the faces changed / decade to decade. nothing makes up for that."

Leslie and I had never formally promised either monogamy or permanence, but the logic of how we'd set up our life together, the idea of family we enacted with Emma, seemed predicated on some lesbian version of the traditional rights and obligations of a marriage. Certainly Les appeared to me to perceive our sex as something serious, highly moral, definitely not the kind "based on temptation." She wanted to know what I thought about in bed, she wanted to be sure I didn't have fantasies that didn't include her.

As my poem indicates, I sensed I was losing something but had made up my mind to live with the loss. My compromise was perhaps made palatable by the fact that my identity as an open lesbian seemed to make me subversive almost by definition. I could settle down, quit thrashing about so much, transferring to the collective some of the burden of smashing convention that hitherto had rested too heavily on my individual shoulders.

My major satisfactions in this period were not the ecstatic and irregular ones that I had defiantly claimed as a teenager and recently pursued as a quasi-bohemian artist. Indeed, they looked a lot like the middle-class satisfactions of rational production and measurable achievement in which my family of origin had specialized. But along with the work, there were always homely pleasures, not the least of them the literary and political gossip that traversed the city, the region, and sometimes the continent with amazing speed. What was the legend-in-her-time white working-class dyke poet, supposedly settled with a lover in Oakland, doing in Boston making googly eyes at the academically empowered Native American poet? Who'd gotten into a major fight with whom at which panel at NWSA (pronounced "Nawsuh," for National Women's Studies Association), its annual meeting our equivalent of a women's movement county fair on a continental scale? Would Prairie Fire Organizing Committee have its predicted showdown with Fort Dyke (seps with attitude) at the Christopher Street Liberation Day march?

In the warm months and less frequently in the cold ones we escaped from city routines, taking Emma camping in New Jersey, visiting friends upstate or down south, where she could cavort with shaggy animals and swim in local lakes while we sipped iced tea on shady porches or sank into deep hammocks to read magazine submissions. With the car radio tuned to the country-and-western station, we sang along to "You Picked a Fine Time to Leave Me, Lucille" and my favorite, "Drop-kick Me, Jesus, Through the Goalposts of Life." We drove to North Carolina in the springtime, a bored child and a frantic cat egging each other on to mayhem in the back of Les's clunky VW wagon, which broke down just outside the Baltimore Harbor Tunnel. Once we recovered from the trip we enjoyed a peaceable interlude in a sagging farmhouse inhabited by a Women's Center pal of Les's who was now in nursing school. Dot boasted of her newly acquired country skills, which ranged from keeping bugs off a cabbage and climbing a barbed-wire fence to cooking placenta in wine sauce, a trendy dish at local birthings.

We hunted up bargain underpants and blue jeans on Sundays in the musty, crowded shops around Grand Street, sniffing the pickles in open barrels on the sidewalk, ogling the cakes in Gertel's Bakery, then stopping in for real sustenance at one of the dairy restaurants. Our favorite was the Garden Cafeteria, a place on East Broadway next to the *Daily Forward* building, beloved by us for both prices and

atmosphere. At the door you received a ticket, and as you moved down the line of steam tables, each server punched it to show how much you'd spent—so many cents for soup, for boiled vegetables, so much for a steaming plate of kasha varnishkes with gravy. The total, paid as you left, was unbelievably low, but a sign on the wall warned of the stiff penalty for lost tickets. Customers, many of them ancient, were inclined to linger over bright yellow cake and boiled coffee, so another sign, stamped on metal, admonished: AFTER YOU FINISH YOUR MEAL PLEASE GIVE YOUR SEAT FOR THE NEXT Years later, when the Garden had closed and the space was being gutted for a Chinese restaurant, I snagged that sign off a trash heap as a souvenir for Leslie.

We indulged the hobby of our secret language, as private as sex, with its elaborate cast of fantasy characters, among them that swinging sister, Nun Other (as in “I love you and Nun Other”), animal familiars for ourselves and our friends (one couple were known collectively as “the Monkphants” because we'd guessed they had a monkey-and-elephant fetish) and deliciously mean designations for enemies (obnoxious men were “bastards,” short for “turkey bastards,” the implement then becoming widely known as standard technology for do-it-yourself donor insemination).

Our unwieldy threesome became a working unit, as Emma and I learned to get along without Les's intervention. I grew to be proud of the family we were building. Increasingly, my writing was finding an audience. Life was hard, but we were pioneers; we figured it was supposed to be that way. We had going for us our young energy, the optimism that flowers in the youth of social movements. I'd always been a skeptic, and a fan of complexity (a favorite word of both Les's and mine), a utopian and yet an unbeliever. I was always waiting for effective leadership. In its absence, I kept schlepping.

It was a dappled time, struggle flecked with happiness. “Hard to be us,” our friend Shirley Wilkes used to say, with rueful pride and gentle irony. We knew that she, a Black dyke feminist, caught it coming and going, and we were pleased to be included because in some ways we did, too. We had no careers (as the world understands such things), no property, no men nor stake in making nice to them. The way we saw it, fish sans bicycles were up a creek and sitting pretty, the freest women on the planet. Except for each other, what had we to lose?

EIGHT

A Cloud and Its Consequences

trash (*trăsh*) n. **1.a.** *Worthless or discarded material or objects; refuse or rubbish. . . . 2.a.* *Empty words or ideas. b.* *Worthless or offensive literary or artistic material. 3.* *A person or group of people regarded as worthless or contemptible.*—**trash** tr.v. **trashed, trash • ing, trash • es.**
1. *Slang. a.* *To throw away; discard: “Ideas and works of art . . . get bought and trashed as quickly as razor blades” (New York). b.* *To wreck or destroy by or as if by vandalism; reduce to trash or ruins. c.* *To beat up; assault. d.* *To subject to scathing criticism or abuse; attack verbally . . .*

—*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*

IN 1981, I GOT TRASHED. (Note the niceties of usage: children of the New Left and its spin-offs don’t say “my work got trashed,” but “*I* got trashed.”) The charge was anti-Semitism, evidence of which supposedly appeared in an early draft of my first novel.

This was a semiprivate trashing that never registered on the letters pages of periodicals like *off our backs* and *Sinister Wisdom*, which served our community as informal ideological seismographs. But in Leslie’s and my world, it was off the Richter scale. Though I understood even before the earth stopped undulating that I should try not to take what had happened personally (it was just one of those things, those social cataclysms that People in Groups periodically generate), it marked an end to my romance of lesbian belonging. While it might have been somewhat random, it wasn’t accidental, but grew out of a climate in which the politics of a range of identities—sexual, racial, ethnic—were being pursued in ways that increasingly made my corner of dykedom feel like a demolition derby.

In a time when denunciatory rhetoric conflating a wide range of strategies for progressive social change with various forms of reactionary nationalism has largely obscured the real achievements of identity politics—with the result that the phrase itself now typically functions more as an epithet than as a neutral description—it’s important to be clear that the destruction I refer to can’t be blamed on our efforts to bring identities into the political picture. Such efforts were (and remain) vitally

necessary in addressing power imbalances ignored not only by the Old Left but by the straight, male-dominated white New Left and the patriarchal leadership of Black Power and other racial justice movements.

Our infighting recalled unhappy traditions of internecine warfare within other radical insurgencies. The connection emerged vividly when Les and I attempted to explain to her stepmother why I'd decided to suspend work on my novel, a tale so weird and convoluted that we always stumbled in the telling, aware how bizarre it must seem to the uninitiated. A tart-gentle Manhattan grandma from an immigrant background who'd made a career as an epidemiologist, she surprised us with the quick empathy facilitated by her history on the left. My story, she said, recalled the days when Communist party members used to be "brought up on charges" for offenses like white chauvinism. "What you're experiencing," she pronounced with the authority of a pro, "is about maintaining ideological purity."

While lesbian feminism was itself of course a species of identity politics, the first context in which I recall encountering the term was a statement issued in 1977 by a pathbreaking Black feminist group, the Combahee River Collective. "Above all else," that document stirringly declares, "our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. . . . We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression." Ever mindful of social structures and economics, the statement emphasizes grassroots organizing, rejects biological reductionism, advocates coalition work, and eschews the "fractionalization" promoted by white lesbian separatists. Far from summoning Black feminists to withdraw into the defensive insularity of the Most Oppressed, it envisions alliances sturdily rooted in the historical and contemporary particularities of various groups' experiences.

Les and I were soon up to our eyeballs in this brand of identity politics, a corrective to the antileft bias that marked too much of white lesbian and radical feminist politics and in our experience often presaged a romanticized view of women, encouraging neglect of real world organizing in favor of emphasis on "wimmin's culture." We welcomed the attention to race, class, *and* gender in the work of a new generation of lesbians of color, perceiving it as crucial both on its own terms and for the example it provided of alternatives to the quest for one true locus of oppression that preoccupied too many feminists. To illustrate how narrow such politics could be, Les often told the story of an experience she'd had at a women's bookstore event set up to promote her lesbian poetry anthology: a white audience member approached her to complain that a stunning poem about a young Black boy gunned down by a white policeman revealed its author to be "too much into her racism and not enough into her sexism."

Even as I embraced the new identity politics, they sometimes left me feeling nervous. While I'd been dealing consciously with race for a number of years now, I'd been doing so in the context of predominantly white groups where the issues were always "outreach," greater "sensitivity." Now the oppressed were setting their own agenda, and responding felt a lot less optional. I was afraid of falling short, of not evolving fast enough, of revealing ugly flaws that might not easily be pardoned,

foremost among these a liberal nervousness I deemed as bad as prejudice.

Years before, at a mid-seventies poetry benefit, Audre Lorde had trained her X-ray vision on me and diagnosed my problem. We had met on other occasions, but I was still a bit starstruck. At the start of the evening I apologized for not having let her know sooner how much I admired her work. Hours later, on her way out the door, she handed me a poem scrawled on a paper napkin. Titled "Letter for Jan," it begins: "No I don't think you were chicken not to speak / I think you / afraid I was mama as laser / seeking to eat out or change your substance / Mawulisa bent on destruction by threat / who might cover you / in a thick dark cloud of guilty symbols." At the time, I'm afraid I was too unnerved at having my cover blown to appreciate the wry reassurance of the ending: "When all the time / I would have loved you / speaking / being a woman full of loving / turned on / and a little bit raunchy / and heavy / with my own black song."

My insecurities prompted me to compare myself unfavorably to Les, whose political courage I intensely admired. She'd led the effort to integrate our magazine's editorial collective on a meaningful and not merely token level, and in the process had gotten close to a circle of Black and Latina lesbian writers, among them contributors to the groundbreaking volume *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. She joined a New York group called DARE (Dykes Against Racism Everywhere) and published an essay on racism and writing that proved intensely controversial, especially because she faulted radical feminist icon Mary Daly's uncritical reliance on European colonial accounts of the horrors of South Asian patriarchy.

Les spoke her mind, took action, seemed the *real* activist, while I was a born observer (the *real* writer, she'd say), never much at ease with the rough-and-tumble play of People in Groups. And she was Jewish, where I was simply White, an increasingly salient fact as, partly inspired by the challenge posed by women of color to the myth of a monolithic feminist sisterhood, Jewish feminists in increasing numbers began to organize. Along with a lot of other dykes who'd never given much thought to the importance of their identities as Jews, she now joined a lively public conversation about the strengths of shared culture, the dangers of anti-Semitism, and possibilities for building coalitions with women of color.

Les's work as an editor and critic seemed eminently useful, my poems and stories a luxury, and although I kept insisting on the dangers of judging creative work according to its perceived political uses, deep down I wondered what licensed me to speak. My own identity—what Audre's poem had called my substance—was a thing whose value I tried mightily to believe in; intellectually, I knew that all experience is precious, that what was being asked of those with greater privilege was simply that we quit expecting to be first, not that we bow out altogether. Yet in my heart of hearts I didn't feel so optimistic. Maybe women like me, who weren't all that oppressed, should just shut up, thereby making more room for those involved in "breaking silences" (the controlling metaphor of identity politics, in time invoked by a spectrum of feminists from sadomasochists to incest survivors).

Despite these worries, my work was going well. My first book of fiction, a collection of stories published the year I turned thirty, had gotten enough of the right sort of review attention to make me feel really successful for the first time since I'd

ceased to be a model student. The Women's Press Limited had brought out a British edition. It wasn't exactly the big time, but, given my subject matter and my U.S. publisher, a mom-and-pop outfit in Ithaca, New York, it was more than I'd expected. Energized, I'd been working on a novel about the fate of a lesbian family in the aftermath of the biological mother's death: the flommy "kidnaps" her daughter from the father, a conventional sort who resents his ex-wife's former lover and tries to end her contacts with the child. I called it *Sinking, Stealing*.

On the political front, too, it had been an eventful year. In the summer of 1980 I'd joined a group of women from several East Coast cities who were planning a large-scale demonstration to take place in late November in our nation's capital. Conceived as a pageant of feminist grief and anger at the threat to life on earth posed by all militarism, with a focus on scary new wrinkles in the arms race, the protest was known as the Women's Pentagon Action. It was intended to be quite different in form as well as message from the typical "Washington demo."

The plan that came out of months of chaotic meetings called for a day of dramatic activities, led by enormous, colorful puppets made for the occasion by the Vermont-based Bread and Puppet Theater. We would begin with a solemn procession from Arlington Cemetery to the Pentagon, where we'd act out a series of relevant emotions—mourning, rage, empowerment, and defiance—in choreographed stages. Holding hands, we would ring the bleak five-sided structure, or as much of it as our numbers permitted. (As it turned out, even with more than two thousand women participating we still had to close up gaps in the circle with strips of fabric held by the demonstrators.) Affinity groups would "weave webs of life"—symbolic barriers of colored yarn—to protest the cult of Mutual Assured Destruction that had its home inside the walls. Those planning to risk arrest would block the main entrances, sitting or lying down until the cops carried them off.

The group's makeup was as politically eclectic as its structure was amorphous. Many members were lesbians; many more were not. Some had ties to older antiwar groups like the War Resisters League, around since the 1920s and instrumental in mobilizing secular pacifist opposition to the Vietnam War. Others were aligned with the emerging environmental movement known as ecofeminism. Still others had been involved in the grassroots opposition to nuclear power that flourished in the era of the Three Mile Island disaster. The year before the Pentagon Action, I myself had joined a civil disobedience blockade of the Indian Point nuclear plant, on the Hudson River a few miles north of home. I'd been arrested and had spent two nights in jail, sleeping in a gym with a group of other Jane Does, all held for our refusal to furnish the police with real names and identification.

On that occasion, I'd found collective incarceration intriguing but irritating. Decision was by consensus instead of majority vote, requiring lengthy discussion in order to achieve unanimous agreement on any proposed course of action. The simple phrase "I block consensus" portended harrowing new dimensions in political tedium. Our Pentagon protest promised similar frustrations. For that and other reasons, I had mixed feelings about my involvement.

One obvious problem was that the group was far too white. Its racial problems closely paralleled those I'd already encountered in CARASA. Although that organization was inclusively named the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against

Sterilization Abuse, in practice it mostly focused on abortion, the issue that most white feminists cared about far more than they did the problem of forced sterilization, which was rampant in many communities of color. The Women's Pentagon Action similarly engaged a mostly white, middle-class constituency. Like the anti-nuclear movement overall, it mistakenly assumed that just because a nuclear war would end the world for everyone, people of all races and classes would come together to prevent it. Aspects of militarism that were of more immediate concern to certain Third World communities—U.S. military aid to repressive governments, for instance, or the use of sites in Puerto Rico for air force target practice—often got no more than passing mention in a leaflet.

On the plus side, it was action, and I needed to act, for I was flooded, much as I'd been in childhood, by images of the earthly hell in preparation as the U.S.-Soviet arms race sharply escalated in the second half of the Carter presidency. A *women's* action made perfect sense to me, not because I believed, as some of our members did, that women were inherently nonviolent (if that were so, why thousands of years of wars?), but because I was still committed to a world within the world, a space for my gender to explore its powers free of masculine interference. I liked the notion of a group of women taking on an issue so often left up to men, going global, as it were, rather than sticking to our gendered turf of predictable concerns like reproductive rights and day care. I approved of the creative imagery, the effort to reinvent protest. But I felt that the emphasis on symbol and ritual needed to be balanced with attention to practical means of reforming violent structures. And I regretted the dearth of thought to go along with the feeling. I wanted to delve into the economics of the arms race and to name the global reach of U.S. military might as an effect of something called imperialism as much as patriarchy. "Take the toys away from the boys," which we chanted in the street, was a clever line, but it wasn't analysis.

Above all, I chafed at the sentimental notion of women's special virtues that seemed to have proliferated in recent years and now pervaded much of the white women's movement like a sickly sweet air freshener. The Pentagon Action borrowed its ideas of women as natural nurturers from sources including the feminist nonviolence movement, the nascent ecofeminist movement, and the less militant strains of lesbian separatism. Its understanding of war as "male violence" drew on books by radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin, whose outrageous rhetoric ("men love death" Les and I parodied—or was it an actual quotation?) I regarded as a classic instance of feminists' all too frequent preference for feel-good sloganeering over strenuous thinking. Awareness that People in Groups everywhere exhibit similar tastes did little to console me for local backwardness.

In 1981 I wrote a poem called "Apostate," poking fun at the vogue for images of spinsters and quilts and weaving as symbols of a gender-given mission to stitch up a world ripped to shreds by destructive men. Hadn't I become a feminist precisely to avoid a life of brainless, blameless servitude? I was thinking in part of the Pentagon Action's "webs of life" when I wrote the opening lines: "Furthermore, I abjure / these textile metaphors." Paraphrasing a famously violent epigram ("when I hear the word *culture* I reach for my revolver"), I ended by preferring writing well to being good: "when / I hear the word *nurture* / I reach for my / pen."

In the event, the first Pentagon Action (there were two, in consecutive years) took place in the weird interregnum that followed the 1980 presidential election, when everyone I knew was frantically wondering how we'd ever get through just *one* Reagan administration. Les and I were moving into a new apartment on the top floor of a squarish, three-story brick building on Eleventh Street across from Prospect Park. We'd answered a classified ad for a "working couple," knowing it was a long shot. When we saw all the space and light, we kept insisting, "But we *do* work!" and managed to bamboozle the aging, timid landlord into taking our security deposit even though a pair of dykes clearly wasn't what he'd envisioned.

Half my things were still in boxes when I left for D.C. and discomforts familiar from so many other demos: the borrowed apartment, bed with slept-in sheets, the importunate cat and souring milk in a strange refrigerator, the paucity of toilets, the hordes of sectarians, the irritation of coming well prepared and having to replicate the miracle of the loaves and fishes for the multitude who neglect to bring water and food on a daylong outing. Yet underneath it all was the tang of genuine adventure.

Emma joined me for the initial phase, the somber, silent trek through almost-winter Arlington, which was more to my taste than the mourning and raging on cue. But mourn and rage we did, all around the bureaucratic fortress. Les arrived to take over parenting duties before I got arrested.

Late that night, a bunch of us who'd pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges were herded, wearing handcuffs and leg irons, onto a bus that drove over endless twisting roads, toward daybreak disgorging us at Alderson Federal Penitentiary, where we served our sentences, ten days in most cases, amid the rolling hills of West Virginia.

When a new anthology that Les had coedited appeared in the spring of 1981, the publishers organized a splashy promotional event, a marathon poetry reading to be held in Boston's venerable Arlington Street Church. The program featured literary heavies, so many of them, Les and I decided that we'd all be lucky if the floor held up under the collective weight. Cynically-boastfully, we took to calling it "the Circus."

Audre Lorde was there, sucking smoke from a fragrant joint that was passed around on the way to the party afterward. She danced far into the night, looking like a younger self, the Audre of gay-girl bars, not the stately mother-oracle who'd just revealed her visions from a pulpit. Adrienne Rich and Michelle Cliff were there, Adrienne with her strange patrician accent ("pulpit" pronounced "poolpit"), joking that she and Audre were turning into "the Mutt and Jeff of the antiracism circuit." Pat Parker had flown in from the Bay Area, and so had Judy Grahn, that self-taught genius, who claimed (entirely implausibly, I thought) that she'd written her great long poem "A Woman Is Talking to Death" in a day or two on a peach brandy high. She and Paula Gunn Allen appeared to be an item.

Despite my reluctance to engage in feminist hero worship, I couldn't help but be impressed. Most of these women were famous (for lesbians). I greatly admired their poems, their politics. Of course I felt like a bit of an interloper. Not only was I younger, less well known, but I was the only one on the program who was white, middle-class, and what Adrienne liked to refer to as "social Christian."

Through the magazine, Les had made us some brilliant new friends, Shirley Wilkes and Aimee Huerta, both writer-editors and leaders of an emerging cultural-political coalition among feminists of color. They'd recently moved to Brooklyn, to an apartment blocks from us. We'd helped them paint while the place was still empty. I remember perching on a ladder, paint roller in hand, discussing poetry with Aimee. Like me, she owed her first allegiance to that genre, but increasingly turned to prose to work out complex trains of thought. I was enormously attracted by her penchant for what I'd soon describe, in an essay called "A Movement of Poets" that argued against narrow agendas for feminist poetry, as "courageous scrutiny of what is most frightening and destructive in ourselves as well as in the world outside us."

We all got along well, but Les and Shirley were especially tight. Both were born organizers with lengthy academic training whose own vocations as writers often took a back seat to their mission of introducing the work of women of color and anti-racist whites to feminist audiences. Soon Shirley's battered car, the Brown Bomber, was a regular in front of our stoop. Emma and I grew used to the energetic sound of Les's half of their phone conversations, gossip seamlessly joined to strategizing.

The Brown Bomber brought Aimee and Shirley to Croton-on-Hudson, where Les and I spent an August house-sitting while Emma visited grandparents in Israel. They shared our relish of simple homemade food and complicated movement scandals, dissection of which Shirley interspersed with dramatic readings from supermarket tabloids. All four of us badly needed a break from the demands of pressured, increasingly public lives, from the scary adulation of being perceived as a walking symbol of one's espoused political values, from cutthroat competition in the name of nurturing. But Les and I didn't doubt that Aimee and Shirley, as a Black and Latina couple, had it rougher than we did. They were caught up in a peculiarly racialized variant of the love-hate dynamic that so frequently enmeshed successful feminists. Too many white women saw them as leaders and sought their token presence on this or that panel, too many sister dykes of color resented their prominence. Identity politics placed them on permanent exhibit, their domestic fortunes seeming to offer clues to the future of interethnic coalition building.

While some of these difficulties were apparent at the time, it's only in hindsight that I emphasize the pressures we all faced. Back then I was focused on the possibilities. I hoped for personal success for my writing—not measured in mainstream terms, for I knew the mainstream wouldn't have me, but with a lesbian audience—yet never envisioned it as a purely individual achievement. I was learning so much from women like Shirley and Aimee. Though the politics of our diverse identities often meant working in separate arenas, we never doubted that we were building something large and good together. We seemed poised to unite complex analysis (so much more satisfying than women-are-better platitudes) and the lushest, starkest truths of poetry. I imagined that we were just getting started. The unease I sometimes experienced about my "identity credentials" was, I hoped, just a mild neurotic symptom. I ignored it, kept on trucking.

I worked well in Croton, getting further into *Sinking*, *Stealing* and completing "A Movement of Poets." I enjoyed the cool and quiet, woodsy runs and walks and swimming, and cooking in the sinfully spacious suburban kitchen. There was just one

major problem, Les's reluctance to make love. There was no particular reason, she insisted, it was just how she felt right now. In fact, it wasn't the first time I'd remarked that the rhythms of her sexual interest seemed less determined by anything that was going on between us than by mysterious inner forces I had no access to. So much for my hopes that unpressured time together might help us recover the primary physical connection we'd had in our early days. I felt both angry and disappointed (this was our *vacation*), even though I remembered other times when I'd been the one to turn her down.

So gradually that I hardly noticed what was happening, I'd begun to think of sensual happiness as a lovely foreign country we'd visited once for too brief a time. I didn't know why I sometimes withdrew from her, any more than I knew why she turned off to me. I guessed it had to do with what I called "feeling crowded," the lack of solitude and separation endemic to family life. I craved suspense, the rituals of seduction. She seemed almost alarmed by any spontaneity, as though lovemaking were official business and had to be conducted by the book.

When we were new, our sex had felt like freedom, made from volitions distinct yet coinciding. Now we were so close and yet our timing was off; we competed strangely to give each other pleasure. When I lay in her arms and let her work her will on me, a will that only wanted my satisfaction, I felt immobilized, helpless, stripped of adult sexual powers. I felt she was directing me how to feel. And when her sex was locked away from me (she *didn't feel safe*), I was desolate as a child denied the breast.

Later, when the term came into vogue in dykedom, we would joke about "lesbian bed death," the notion that long-term lesbian partners are more prone than other couples to a loss of sexual interest in each other. I never put much credence in the concept, never felt that our dry spells were something to be accepted as part of a larger pattern. For me they remained a quiet emergency, lack of sex an intimation of chronic hunger.

I only hinted at these thoughts in my notebooks, which no longer seemed as private as they had when I was single. Occasionally there's the glimpse of an underlife: "I thought about the need for a journal that would contain things I can't *say*—I mean things forbidden or entirely anomalous w/in the feminist context. . . . Many things L. would understand. But not for instance that I fantasize about men's bodies. (Not that I understand it precisely either. But I admit it to myself.)"

Today I can't recall those fantasies; what seems significant is less the fact of their existence than my need to refer to them in writing. My notion of a journal in which I might record things I hesitated to speak aloud hints at my growing willingness to explore those "unacceptable" impulses that adhere to the underside of all social life—impulses that, in a densely ideological setting, often register as politically transgressive. The fact that *I could do men* was a sign of deviance in dykedom (at least insofar as I maybe hadn't outgrown it); so, too, was my conviction that the flaws of really existing women belied utopian hopes of our perfectibility. Not just the erotic fact alone but its convergence with other factors would ultimately lead me to rethink my lesbian loyalties.

Les was crabby like me, so my loathing of sentimental theories only reinforced our bond. It was the sexual stuff—not just retrograde fantasies but the depth of my disappointment in the waning of our passion—that I sensed was dangerous to our

hope of permanence.

I spent October in the Berkshires, at the Millay Colony for the Arts. It was my first stint at an artists' colony, and the boost it gave to my writerly self-esteem was hugely amplified when I got word that I'd been awarded a National Endowment for the Arts fiction fellowship. I seemed poised to finish my novel in record time.

On a Sunday night in December, I received a long-distance call from a couple named Stephanie and Joyce. Les had worked with them in several capacities, and was currently advising Stephanie on putting together a volume of Jewish lesbian writing. They'd captivated Emma, inviting her to stay in their roomy old house and entertaining her in the style of hectic fun often favored by childless people who like to play at parenting. They were prominent in "lit biz" and well known to several of Les's and my friends, who regarded them as flaky and politically naive, but amusing to watch and usefully energetic. Drama and rumor were their attendant atmosphere.

The two of them professed to admire my writing. Naturally, I was flattered. In hopes that they would help me get my novel published, I'd been sending them installments as I progressed. Now it seemed they'd changed their minds. They were both on the line, though Joyce was doing the talking, in a tone that implied I knew exactly why she should be so angry at me. My novel, she said, was anti-Semitic to the core. How could I have written this Jew-hating book?

Incredulous, yet with a sense of *déjà vu*, struggling to breathe normally, I tried to find out what she was getting at. The main point, it appeared, was that I'd made my character Daniel, a Jewish father, my "villain." The extralegal custody fight that formed the basis of the plot pitted him against a gentile heroine. Daniel was "rich," a "devil," a man without a conscience, all attributes of classic anti-Semitic stereotypes.

I knew, of course, that I shouldn't be defensive—the rule of thumb for responding to political criticism. But this wasn't dialogue; there was no benefit of the doubt, no sense that I (or Les, for that matter, for of course, as they well knew, she too had read the manuscript) was also a person who might care about this issue. I got off the phone and, sobbing, went in to explain to her the bizarre predicament we'd just landed in.

While the telephone call had felt like an ambush, we now saw there'd been warning signs. Stephanie and Joyce had been picking fights lately, doing peculiar things. Shirley had told us how Stephanie had lectured a group of women of color on anti-Semitism. "Would you hide me in your attic?" she'd demanded, as though, Shirley said, it hadn't occurred to her that if Reagan's America took a fascist swerve, dark-skinned people would be in camps as fast as Jews. Joyce, who wasn't Jewish, was clearly "taking leadership," to use a phrase Les and I borrowed from some left sectarians who wanted whites to hitch our wagons to the star of the more oppressed Third World.

We realized that Joyce and Stephanie's ties to a number of our community's most influential writers and editors meant that they could damage my reputation (and by implication Les's) among a lot of people who hadn't had a chance to judge my manuscript for themselves. After all, this was a moment in which many Jewish lesbians were seeing the world through the powerful lens of a newly revalued identity. As feminists had done in early consciousness-raising groups, they were questioning much in their own settled way of viewing things. They would surely question the

perceptions of a non-Jew, and they might well mistrust my motives. While few would believe I could be an out-and-out bigot, many would suspect I must be guilty of *something*. And in an atmosphere in which the Reagan revolution prompted fears that North America could become the site of widespread, European-style anti-Semitism, the question of fairness to me and my book might pale beside the sense of urgency about alerting lesbians to the dangers of stereotyping Jews.

Thus began the phenomenon that Leslie and I dubbed “the Cloud.” We were thinking of a character in the comic strip *Li'l Abner*, who walks around beneath his own personal thunderhead. The accusations hovered at ceiling height. Stigma had adopted us.

When I didn't recant, Joyce and Stephanie dispatched to a list of prominent lesbian literati a lengthy memorandum entitled “An Analysis of the Anti-Semitic Content in *Sinking, Stealing*.” The document explained, “It is a difficult task for gentiles to comprehend the depth of violence in [the novel]. . . . The characterization is based on anti-Semitism, based on a false notion of Jews: Jews as evil, Jews without integrity, Jews as inhuman. . . . We hope that these comments will not only assist Jan Clausen in her necessary consciousness-raising, but will also help both writers and readers in developing a sensitivity to anti-Semitism in lesbian literature.”

It takes a village to trash an activist. The village took its cue. Some of the participants were Jews; many were non-Jews anxious to do the right thing. As Les and I had expected, most who joined the critical chorus discounted Stephanie and Joyce's extreme rhetoric, yet urged me to contemplate radical surgery on my book after expunging lurking prejudice from my soul. Some concurred with the memorandum's premise that unflattering portrayals of “oppressed” characters were to be avoided at all costs. Les and I got strong support from women who believed that lesbians had to be able to write fiction as complex as the social worlds we inhabited. But in a way it didn't matter. We felt branded, exposed, accused of an awful crime against identity, in a situation in which the charge was itself both proof and punishment.

I have often tried to dissect this incident, to understand how trashing happens, how the idealistic will to change can become a medium in which ugly suspicions flare and spread, much as an overgrowth of fungus provokes a yeast infection. Trashing turns real problems into allegories in which the trashee figures as The Problem personified. Once the process is set in motion, it draws in bystanders, playing on their fear of being the next to be denounced, appealing to their wish for reassurance that they're among the elect, they're part of the solution. I know because I've had all those feelings myself. And I know, having been the target, how trashing hollows out the trashee, replacing healthy self-critique with a debilitating cycle of self-doubt and defensiveness.

Maybe the worst thing was the way the charges seeped into the groundwater of my life with Les and Emma. *You love two Jews, and you're a Jew hater*: no one directly said as much, but it couldn't fail to be implied. And the implication was in a sense irrefutable because it concerned not actions but subtle states of consciousness. It produced in me sensations that foreshadowed the hopeless feeling of being on trial for my identity—of having to clear my subjectivity's good name—that awaited me when I slept with Benjamin.

At a level beyond the issue of anti-Semitism, my novel had fallen afoul of an intracommunity dispute about what to do with this powerful thing called identity now that we'd discovered it. Was membership in an "oppressed" group to be seen as conferring an automatic badge of politico-moral authority? Was feminism basically a quest for purity, a mighty effort at self-reform? Were evils like racism, Jew hating, and class bias to be understood as patriarchal toxins polluting our pristine female natures? Could power be innocent?

Those who took this tack increasingly mistrusted the complexities indispensable to art; ambiguity, for them, was in the enemy camp. It seemed to me that they attributed extraordinary powers to language while all but ignoring social structures and economics. They prioritized crafting the perfect consciousness (would it were possible!) over *doing* anything. But there were others who, while also mindful of the dangers of unexamined stereotypes, declined to trade the risks of the imagination for the sterile safety of "positive images."

I cast my lot with these last, yet the irony was that for all of my mistrust of the politics of virtue, I still of course aspired to be good; that was what made the trashing so devastating. I'd not by any means jettisoned my feminine tendency to measure my self-worth in terms of usefulness to others. That imperative of service and the resulting reassurance furnished much of the motivation for my activism. The fact that I'd tried so hard and been rewarded with a Cloud enraged me enough to sour me permanently on the notion of sacrifices for the greater good of dykedom.

When I think about the Cloud and its sequelae, I think of Les's narrow lair, which boasted absurdly many doors—one to the dining room, facing Emma's bedroom; one to the outside hall (this door was bolted and never used); plus unevenly hung French doors opening onto a large space that served us as a book and magazine warehouse. I think about lying on her double bed—our beds were our only truly comfortable furniture and we often used them in preference to chairs—debriefing from the latest confrontation. I think of our practice of screening each other's mail ("tasting," we called it, like paranoid emperors); somehow it was easier to read a hostile missive when its noxious contents had first been summarized. I think of watching "Dallas," eating tons of air-popped popcorn. I think of feeling completely debilitated.

I think of Les's desk, which sat in front of her only window, a window that faced the wall of a neighboring building, and of how that desk was surrounded and overshadowed with stacks of books that loomed in precarious, shifting arrangements. They were books on the Holocaust, books on the Middle East, books of interviews with Palestinian women, books on all the wrenching what-ifs of history that had to be addressed in the major essay she'd begun on anti-Semitism and racism. Its purpose was to consider the issues from a comparative perspective that would get beyond the vortex of competitive agony too often suggested by the phrase "Black-Jewish relations." Pre-Cloud she'd planned to write something on the topic, but the accusations had deeply wounded her, and the project now took on the dimensions of an obsession, as though its difficulty made it more valuable.

I think of her labor over every sentence, debating nuances, weighing tone and balance: she would be an anti-Stephanie, beyond reproach in her handling of sources, scrupulously balanced, fair to those she disagreed with. I think of the cats keeping her

company, loyally indolent, and how every surface was covered with dust and cat hair and pages of typescript cross-hatched with insertions and corrections.

I remember (but this memory is colored by later ones) how helpless I felt in the face of Les's moods, how I tried to build a mood of my own, insulated from that in her which I had no power over.

I know I wasn't the only lesbian feminist from whom the acrid factionalism of those years, and the merciless intrusions of ideology into every crevice of fantasy and affect, exacted too great a price. The quest for innocent power and moral purity was in the end as problematic when pursued by lesbians as in any nineteenth-century cult of true womanhood.

By the time a year had passed since the Boston "Circus" reading, it already seemed like a dyke equivalent to King Edward VII's funeral, that pageant of concord among the world powers just before the Great War. After 1981, all we did was fuss and fight. Desire itself became a bone of feminist contention, with women at odds over pornography and sex work and the ethical implications of various sexual practices. My writer friend Maud got trashed around this time, after allowing herself to be videotaped going down on Betty Dodson, the author of *Liberating Masturbation*. The tape was shown at a Speakout on Politically Incorrect Sex organized by dissidents at the 1982 Barnard conference on feminist scholarship. Shortly afterward, antiporn feminists phoned her employer and denounced her as a pervert.

Jewish feminist support groups went at each other tooth and nail, Di Vilde Chayes against Di Yiddishe Shvestern, everyone under sudden enormous pressure to identify herself as a Zionist, non-Zionist, or anti-Zionist, everyone up in arms over proper terms and timing of condemnation for the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. (Ten years later, a friend of mine looked back: "We were at each other's throats over the Middle East, and then it was like everybody realized, 'Central America—there's something we can all agree about!'")

The Women's Peace Encampment in Seneca, New York—a lineal descendant of the Women's Pentagon Action—became the site of epic struggles over principles and tactics. Every time I heard the latest from up there, or read about the annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, where they were brawling over whether male children could attend or whether to admit postop transsexuals, I felt mightily relieved to have missed the action. "Thank God," I liked to say, "feminists don't have state power. We'd be putting sisters up against the wall."

Lesbian couples whose long companionship had helped glue Les's and my world together now ripped asunder. Mariah and Bonnie, whose farm near Albany we'd often visited, the elders talking lit biz around the woodstove while Emma played with the dogs and clean snow buried the world, broke up and sold their land. Aimee and Shirley parted bitterly. Aimee moved to the Bay Area and didn't answer letters. Maud would follow her in a year or two, saying before she left, "I'm cutting off pieces of myself just to see what I'm like without them."

It did not occur to me to withdraw from lesbian politics, which of course I could have done without ceasing to love women. It wasn't simply that I had too much invested. It was also that I couldn't turn my back on the dream engendered by those

moments in which the feminist politics of a range of identities got practiced in an open-ended way, one that encouraged deeper probing rather than instant answers, that welcomed differences within beleaguered groups instead of pressuring members into a clenched conformity, that supported “breaking silences” without romanticizing pain, without conditioning the right to be heard on demonstrated suffering.

As bitterly disillusioned as I was with so much in lesbian feminist practice, I was more committed than ever to the worldview that my life as a lesbian had made possible. At home in dykedom, I was merely alienated. Anywhere else I’d be a real alien.

I couldn’t write; the Cloud had seen to that. So as not to fritter away my NEA grant, I went to work half-time for an outfit that Les and I dubbed “the Maxes,” two sexist but fairly harmless guys named Max who ran an executive search firm from a tiny office suite near Columbus Circle. Their focus was the medical industry, and boring afternoons full of monoclonal antibodies afforded me a soothing if surreal escape from the thrills and spills of feminism.

Eventually, I finished *Sinking, Stealing*, which saw the light of print in 1985. My publishers, in both the U.S. and England, were the ones who’d done my story collection. Reviews and sales were both very good. I gave some readings in London and Edinburgh. A lesbian filmmaker optioned the book.

I’d been rehabilitated, only I wasn’t mollified.

Nurture, schmurture, I thought. Hold the textile metaphors. I went through the motions, harboring the seed of future apostasy in the form of an unspoken and unspeakable conviction: *I don’t owe women shit.*

NINE

Questions of Travel

Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?

—Elizabeth Bishop

THE FIRST YEARS of the Reagan era left me both drained and restless. I moved through the treacherous spaces of my women's community clad in cynicism like a bulletproof vest. I loved too soberly, wrapped up in duty. Although you couldn't say the Cloud had driven Les and me apart—in a way, it had even intensified our closeness—the bond had lost its elastic optimism and now felt more like the stunned accord of castaways. Though we could take comfort in our similar responses to the world of feminist politics, our joint immersion meant that we never got a break from a life drenched in *issues*. Our sexual problems interfered with another possible source of comfort and pleasure. What energy we had that wasn't focused on sheer survival—earning a living, parenting a child, coping with depression—went into eminently useful undertakings like Les's monumental essay. Matthew Arnold himself couldn't have faulted our high seriousness.

I reacted to the claustrophobia by casting cautiously about me, seeking new spheres of action. In effect, I was trying to travel without going anywhere. On the political front, I slowly got involved with the Central America solidarity movement—basically the “straight left,” though more and more dykes were joining up. At the same time, I increasingly savored the cracks and crevices of everyday life. Anything peripheral, unanalyzed, enticed me: gorgeous language and stolid faces in the subway, a saunter through an unfamiliar neighborhood where little girls in first communion dresses skittered along the sidewalk like manic peonies, a solitary trip to Shakespeare in the park, the Cuban-Chinese luncheonette on Eighth Avenue where Maud and I met to confess the unfeminist extent of our literary ambitions. I craved a bit of cover from the searchlight of politics.

Such scenes encouraged a kind of mental rambling, an openness to memory and stray association, that I experience as quintessentially erotic, whether or not it connects to clearly sexual fantasies. That this state is also the wellspring of art and poetry—and that I'm supposed to be a writer—hasn't spared me lifelong doubts about how far to cultivate it, and at the time I speak of now, that chronic conflict grew acute.

The idle, the useless, the flagrantly aesthetic, plainly contradicted the imperative of selfless public service that I breathed in with the political air around me. But the local mores affected me so strongly precisely because I received them as reinforcements of values taken in along with my Gerber's baby food. Hadn't I learned early on that pleasure is dangerous, that leisure must always be earned and justified, and that the *good* woman devotes herself to others?

How convenient, then, that a job I stumbled into in a sort of electronic sweatshop provided one of my more dependable modes of access to the realm of chance associations, waking dreams. The business, Enoch Rivers, was a tape transcription agency that employed a floating workforce of eccentrics—neobohemians, actors, borderline psychotics—who liked the flexible hours and informal atmosphere. I worked there off and on for seven years, starting in 1983. Sitting in front of the orange computer screen immersed in the language that poured through my Dictaphone headset—a surreal medley of TV interviews, financial industry training videos, medical jargon, even scratchy conversations recorded from phone wiretaps—I escaped from coherence and purpose for many hours each week with the excellent excuse that I had to make money.

At the transcription job and elsewhere, my restlessness also surfaced as the intensification of a tendency that had been apparent even before the Cloud: I kept falling inconveniently in love with women who hailed from worlds fascinatingly remote from my literary corner of dykedom. Questions of travel came up every time, even when the geography looked tame enough. To get to Enoch Rivers, I took the F train to mid-Manhattan, hurried through the dirty underground tunnel whose function as an impromptu homeless shelter gave it a bleak carnival aura, surfaced at the north side of Forty-second Street, grabbed a takeout coffee from the Greek coffee shop opposite the Grace Building, with its dramatic concave facade, and dodged into a far less glamorous brick structure. There, on an upper floor, I whiled away my afternoons courting eyestrain and carpal tunnel syndrome and lusting after Luz Sosa's tender butch bravado, her tales of life and love in East New York.

If Les and I couldn't seem to make love very often; if in consequence I felt resentful when we did; if I felt too crowded by our public domesticity, our exhaustive sharing of texts and controversies, and yet walled off from her, from delight we'd known at one time—well, at least I could make up stories, I could masturbate, I could savor the aesthetic agony of desire admitted but not enacted. On the grounds that imagination is the molten core of sex, I erroneously reasoned that I might manage my discontent by staying home and thinking hard of elsewhere.

This surge in my ambivalent interest in travels in desire coincided with, and was reinforced by, the emergence of a new kind of feminist conversation about the erotic. Popularly known as the Feminist Sex Wars, the debate-cum-brawl had a positive side that I can better appreciate because, for once, I wasn't smack in the middle of the hostilities. When the antiporn versus anticensorship arguments had died down, when dildos and leather and rococo undergarments were no longer causing screams of outrage, when women who passed for men had broken silences, what stood out to me as the main accomplishment of the controversy was its airing of a series of thoughtful arguments in favor of trusting sexual feelings, respecting their diversity, and stressing women as erotic protagonists, not victims.

While the common portrayal of lesbian feminism as antisex is unfair and inaccurate, it's true that before the Sex Wars the movement had largely avoided anything that would identify it as being *about* sex. Between women, it was felt, the erotic would take care of itself. The parties being gender equals, power shouldn't be a problem. Lesbian sex was frequently depicted as profoundly "natural"—for many, an echo and elaboration of the supposed paradise of mother-infant bonding. Adrienne Rich's extremely influential essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," which took an explicitly maternalist view of female sexuality, had contrasted gay male promiscuity, depicted as an obsessive quest for empty pleasure, with lesbians' focus on loving relationships. Even Audre Lorde's quite daring "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" was carefully vague about *bodies*.

Despite this view of the flesh as epiphenomenal, we wanted sex to do a lot of work. We'd hitched our eros to our ideology, a move equivalent to asking a dragonfly to pull a plow.

Now a bunch of women were talking heat—and dirt. Among the first exchanges in the Sex Wars were volleys fired by women in Les's and my friendship circle. Several of them were involved in S/M, and now became more vocal about it. (I quickly learned to stop saying "S *and* M," phrasing that branded the speaker as hopelessly "vanilla.") Aimee began writing some pretty brave stuff about the implications of being a butch identified Chicana. Because this discussion was, among other things, the outgrowth of a working-class lesbians' revolt against the gentility of middle-class "wimmin's culture," it often usefully emphasized how desire is shaped by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Butch/femme, which had been seen as embarrassingly old-fashioned when it wasn't portrayed as an echo of straight misogyny, now made a comeback as lesbians openly acknowledged the relevance of erotic role-playing to modern feminists. "Incorrect" fantasies, sex work, arousal by pain and violence, sex for sex's sake, anonymous encounters, sleeping around, the attractions of lesbian pornography (and the attraction of some lesbians to nonlesbian porn)—all of these hitherto taboo topics now came up for debate. We were facing the implications of desires that couldn't be cut to fit our politics. Being dykes didn't mean that we floated *above* gender, or that masculinity as both ideal and terror had been effectively excised from our psyches and our bedrooms. Our communities of origin, with their peculiar and specific erotic associations to images of seduction, ravishment, purity, ecstasy, excrement, and sin, were part of us, inevitably reflected in our purportedly pristine feminist sexuality.

The point was not that sex should be exempt from all political critique (though some "sexperts" did eventually engage in a line of argument that boiled down to "whatever's hot is right"). But we had to start from desire and its unsettling revelations, to affirm "the erotic as power" and resist the fearful counsel that would crack down on emotions whenever they exceeded the bounds our logic proposed as suitable.

Les and I were, of course, vanilla—not exciting like our friends who kept whips on their bedside tables. I felt very much on the sidelines of the sex talk, yet was paying close attention to the message that even though our desires had been forged in the crucible of capitalist, imperialist patriarchy, and were therefore saturated in social nastiness, it was okay to have them. In fact, it was partly because we took so seriously

the task of transforming social relations that we needed to be open to *all* reality, psychic reality included.

Here the decadent tendencies of identity politics—its metamorphosis into a quest for innocent power—received a timely corrective. The “sexperts” were saying that we are mixed, contingent beings. Human betterment is not a science of subtraction. What we want is freedom and justice, not ritual purity.

If they were right, perhaps my wanderlust might not be indefensible after all.

I tended to fall in love in novel, dramatic situations; incarceration, revolution, and violence appeared, to my chagrin—well, if not to turn me on exactly, at least to put me in the mood. It happened in 1979 with my antinuke arrest and in the following year during my stint at Alderson. In 1984, on my first trip to Nicaragua, I developed a painful crush on a North American academic. I was embarrassed by what I came to recognize as a pattern of “desire under pressure” both because it seemed so distant from my everyday existence (a.k.a. reality) and because I thought it reflected badly on my political seriousness. I was supposed to be a principled leftist, after all, not a pleasure-seeking tourist or teenybopper. I thought it had to be a problem that otherness and elsewhere (so often “more oppressed”) appealed to the writer in me. When I fell in love with a person, a place, an atmosphere, I also fell in love with stories, I fell in love with language. But the politics of identity in which I’d been saturated admonished the writer to “tell her own story”; telling anyone else’s risked exoticizing, objectifying.

My visits to prison and war plunged me into scenes of stark, riveting drama; they ripped away the veils from social forces and engaged my imagination, both poetic and sensual. But the plunge was brief and included all sorts of safeguards. Wasn’t there something unclean in my excitement?

Because Les and I had naively agreed not to have emotional secrets from each other, I felt obliged to tell her about my crushes, giving rise to melodramatic interludes, periods of tension, explosions and silences, followed at length by a cynical convalescence. She tended to treat my confessions as evidence of some alarming but hopefully transient derangement. She, it appeared, never had a serious thought of having sex with anyone but me. I wanted an erotic separation; only thus could I feel truly *met* when we came together. I wanted to know she was with me because of something lively between us, something supple and risky, that might have been otherwise. That something might have thrived on elbow room, but we always seemed to be, as the saying goes, “all up in each other’s faces.”

She had her own ways of making me feel shut out (for one, we now routinely slept apart on account of her insomnia), but they had nothing to do with wandering libido. She’d say, “I’m monotonous,” the complacent-rueful phrase we used. It was true, and it didn’t make me feel especially cherished. Of course I wanted to think she wouldn’t throw me over, but not because she simply hadn’t noticed other options. The truth was that a lover’s plural inclinations, however upsetting, had always energized me. Hurt, she’d rib me: “Of course some *floozy* is more exciting than your monotonous, faithful one.” She made me out to be a mere sensation-seeker, avid for the spice of novelty.

Increasingly she shut down, for weeks or even months. What happened to her gorgeous openness, her gift for a sensual intensity that used to make me feel both

virtuosic—to be the instigator of this storm of pleasure—and boringly average in my orgasmic moderation? Where did that lushness go when she grew preoccupied; morose; obsessed, in the wake of the Cloud, with textual treachery? (We joked that her perfectionist approach to argumentation would have done a Talmudic scholar proud.) To her, our sex was settled—not perfect, obviously, but she didn’t seem to think there was any cause for panic. I felt deprived but ashamed to make a fuss. I was panicking in slow motion, trying to hold a tricky balance, to cultivate an eros of my own without upsetting the applecart. My parenting of Emma, my literary life, my lesbian identity itself, all meshed so intricately with our coupledness that it seemed any move that destabilized my marriage might topple my entire world.

Despite the brave new feminist affirmations of desire, I felt that “two-timing” Les, as we called it, would be a terribly serious, possibly fatal, step. Not that I ever imagined she’d break up with me simply because I slept with another woman. That wasn’t the way it worked in our world. (How it worked was usually that partners agreed in theory that expectations of strict monogamy were unrealistic, though when it came to practice, things could get much dicier.) But I couldn’t shake the awareness of how upset she’d be, couldn’t picture actually conducting an affair—which would have to take place with her angry, hurt knowledge—as anything but a calamity for us both.

Perhaps this was the reason why the women I fancied weren’t very likely lover candidates. Yet I eventually came to feel that my attractions were as destructive as if I’d gotten further with them. I gave Les a lot to put up with, and my guilt made it worse. There seemed something corrupt in my use of these virtual affairs to dramatize disaffection, erotic and otherwise, that I couldn’t make up my mind either to relinquish or insist on.

Betty, my fave rave from the nuclear power plant protest, was a veteran of fifties bar dyke culture. Although an anarchist, she was patient and sensible, a welcome brake on the urge to martyrdom that sometimes sweeps like a flu virus through civil disobedience actions. She and I were arrested together warbling her favorite protest song, “Give Me That Old Lesbianism” (sung to the tune of “Old Time Religion”). She was boyishly motherly, with short gray hair and a rabbity grin. What I felt for her was simply a pleasurable glow, a thrill at the sight of her clenched fists in handcuffs, a subtle inclination of my cells toward the taut stretch of her body in the sun as we strolled around downtown Buchanan, a sleepy Hudson River town where we spent days in court disposing of misdemeanor charges and supporting our fellow demonstrators.

My crush on Dee was more serious, and shameful: she wasn’t one of our group of amateur outlaws that blew through Alderson Penitentiary in the weeks around Thanksgiving 1980, but a real prisoner. She was in her late thirties, had been locked up for many years. She had first been convicted for attempted robbery, but had later escaped and assaulted a guard in the process. She had more state time to do when the Feds got done with her.

She was tall and blond, neat in jeans and tailored shirts. She looked like a returning college student, a status to which she aspired. She had a job drawing blood in the prison clinic. She was openly gay but not political. She hung with the white,

quasi-middle-class convicts—a leftist radical whose husband was doing life in Marion, some Charles Manson acolytes. I was fascinated by the hints she dropped on the comparative sociology of correctional institutions. She'd liked the cons who went by the old code: you had to toe their line, but at least you knew where you stood with them. She'd been at some coed facilities. The advantage there was knowing that when you had a girlfriend, she wasn't with you just for lack of men.

I could see that the penal system wasn't glamorous, that its purpose and effect were to kill the mind and spirit. But looking into it thrilled me, like watching surgery, seeing the layers of muscle pulled away, the inner workings and connections. Dee would say, "She dropped a dime," or "Somebody caught them homosecting." I wrote it down, but what could I do with it?

The strength of my longing for her caught me by surprise. I was getting out, she wasn't, I couldn't say a word to her. Back home, I told Les, who took it pretty well, I thought. Dee and I corresponded for many years after that, though my romantic feeling faded early on, killed off by the religious homilies and self-help jargon that flowed freely when she set pen to paper.

My participation in the international movement to support popular efforts for sweeping social change in Central America built on and expanded old political involvements. Like the Women's Pentagon Action, it was a forum for opposition to my country's penchant for mass murder in the name of democracy. The militaristic system that had shadowed my childhood with nuclear terror and had jolted my generation's political conscience during the war in Southeast Asia now fomented so-called low-intensity conflict in tiny countries whose populations rejected authoritarian rule and chronic hunger. The urgent situation called on activists to address precisely the social-structural roots of injustice that had gotten short shrift from those radical and lesbian feminists who'd discarded the baby of political economy with the bathwater of the sexist and heterosexist male left.

This was the heyday of Salvadoran death squads, largely composed of moonlighting members of the regular government security forces who kidnapped, tortured, and "disappeared" civilians, then dumped their mutilated bodies in residential neighborhoods. It was also the heyday of U.S. aid to the Salvadoran military. As Salvadoran soldiers trained at Fort Benning and Fort Bragg, Ronald Reagan solemnly certified to Congress that El Salvador was improving its human rights record, thereby triggering a Pavlovian response: the release of more millions to defeat guerrilla forces portrayed as Soviet surrogates. It was the heyday of hidden airstrips and illicit arms deals, of a U.S. administration's sweeping disregard for law in its zeal to fund a Nicaraguan counterrevolution.

I took note of the fact that U.S.-based radical women of color related their local struggles to self-determination in the Third World. Aimee and some of her New York Latina friends immersed themselves in Latin American culture and politics. Audre Lorde, whose mother was from Grenada, wrote an essay denouncing the 1983 U.S. invasion that capped the tragic implosion of the only leftist revolutionary government in the English-speaking Caribbean. And the Central American conflicts themselves emphasized gender politics in ways that increasing numbers of North American feminists were beginning to pick up on. I hoped that Central America work would

allow me to bring together the best of identity politics, opposition to bullying U.S. military might, and hands-on involvement in progressive social restructuring.

Real as these high-minded motives were, I was also again responding to the restless longing for a change of scene that brought questions of travel to the fore of my erotic life. It's hard to explain, in an age of careless tourism, how defensive I felt about wanting to see the world. Some of it had to do with the landlocked mentality of my rearing, in which foreign travel, or even speaking a second language, seemed like a pursuit for fancy people from back east. (I finally applied for my first passport at age thirty-four.) This provincialism was reinforced by my puritan political surroundings. Most dykes I knew rated traveling for pleasure as at best a frivolous habit, at worst an exploitative one.

In fact, the axis of my interest in Elsewhere had run north-south for a very long time. Where the dominant U.S. East Coast culture looks to Europe, the West Coast (though it tries) has more trouble forgetting that we are not geographically or historically disjunct from that other, darker America "down there." As a native of Oregon, I felt the tug of this connection, but as a white radical I was sharply aware of the dangers of cultural imperialism. I'd studied Spanish in high school, and in the early eighties I found myself cruising the Brooklyn Public Library's Spanish literature collection, experiencing a craving for fluency that shamed me as if it had been an excessive physical appetite. How, I thought, could I ever justify my possessive longing for a tongue that wasn't mine? Around that time, I remarked to Les that I'd like to see Mexico, only to hear what I took as a rebuke: *she* wouldn't feel comfortable in the role of privileged tourist in the Third World. Solidarity changed all that, gave me the excuse I thought I needed. Language study would become quite the thing on the left in the years when a rather too reductive slogan had it that El Salvador was Spanish for Vietnam.

The strength of the solidarity movement was its effort to help reverse severe imbalances of political, military, and economic power between north and south by channeling support from the overdeveloped world to popular movements for social change in countries that powerful U.S. interests had traditionally treated as virtual colonies. What would otherwise have been mere international charity was redeemed by this political agenda, and by the fact that priorities were at last being set not at the so-called center, but at the fermenting margins. Besides, "aid" flowed in more than one direction; we believed that we had an enormous amount to learn from Latin Americans about how to steer our own society toward a more democratic and egalitarian destination. Remote as it might seem from the Feminist Sex Wars, this perspective on transnational alliance similarly offered guidelines for the constructive resolution of questions of dangerous power. It said that we had to start from who and where we were. It gave me hope that what I wanted (not just what I thought I ought to want) could be part of the solution.

I first traveled to Nicaragua in the summer of 1984, the fifth anniversary of the Sandinista Triumph, as part of a delegation of "cultural workers." The trip was almost accidental, coming at a time when I was increasingly aware of Central America but hadn't yet joined a solidarity group. I'd finally made up my mind to go somewhere interesting, and had settled on Mexico after consultation with Aimee, who thought

that I might find Mexico City overwhelming but probably could manage all right by myself if I took it easy and stayed in smaller cities. Before I'd made definite plans, I was assaulted in Prospect Park. I escaped being raped and wasn't seriously injured, but in the aftermath I felt shaky, not up to solo travel. Instead, I joined the Nicaragua group, a somewhat random collection of writers and academics who traveled under the auspices of a Sandinista cultural organization.

While my two later trips to Nicaragua would have very clear objectives connected to my work in the Brooklyn Nicaragua Sister City Project, this one was basically revolutionary tourism, undertaken at a point when the contra war was escalating and the Nicaraguan government had decided that it could best enlist the support of North American progressives by bringing bunches of us down for a look at Nicaragua Libre. The hope was that we would return home and set about enlisting our neighbors in the battle to change our government's policies. It was a brilliant tactic, almost unprecedented (the Venceremos Brigades in Cuba operated on a much smaller scale), and as the Sandinistas envisioned, it indeed helped galvanize the U.S. solidarity movement. Yet it brought up the most basic question of travel: to what extent does the traveler touch what's really there, as opposed to moving within her own bottled atmosphere?

I cared a great deal about the principles that the revolution stood for and that so many Nicaraguans were sacrificing so much to implement—above all, that there is *another way*, that wisdom and truth and insight don't belong to the monied classes, that power can ripple up “from below,” that nations can elect alternatives to the devil-take-the-hindmost callousness that pervades global markets. Yet the terms on which this reality was being sold to us, and on which we were buying it, made me hesitate. I winced when a buxom gringa rushed to pose for a snapshot rubbing up against some teenage soldier's AK-47. I bridled when our group was wined and dined by none other than Daniel Ortega, then beginning his first campaign for president. Did the government think we required flattery in exchange for our support? It seemed to me that the Nicaraguan revolutionary success appealed to a shallow, feel-good impulse in U.S. leftist politics. That perception propelled me, upon my return, to work for a time in Brooklyn CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador) instead of plunging more directly into the Nicaragua issue. Only later did I see how thin the edge of glamour was, how quickly war and embargo would take their toll.

In Nicaragua, I found myself shunning rhetoric, drifting toward poetry, flesh and lyrical details: the way the green, volcanic landscape looked like Oregon from the air, and oxen pulled great wooden-wheeled carts, and officials in the Ministry of Culture lugged scarce typewriters (manual, of course) from one office to the next, and hordes of revolutionary urchins swarmed around us, pleading, “¿Tiene un lápiz?” I became obsessed with a fellow delegation member, a gorgeous tough-minded lesbian in a man's world who'd made her career as an academic expert on the Indochina conflict. Tried, was refused (tactfully enough); sobbed for a day and night, bereft, humiliated. Returned to the shock of overdevelopment, and to misery with Les, as we sat in Vermont deconstructing my cheating heart, watching Holstein cows like clouds drifting over an emerald heaven.

As had happened after Alderson and Dee, I burned with shame at having staged what seemed like such an adolescent drama in the midst of other people's life-and-

death issues. I despised myself for openly wanting someone I couldn't have and had no reason to want. Yet I went and did it again the following summer, in that narrow window of opportunity for relationship chaos that Les and I often took advantage of when Emma was safe at sleep-away camp.

At the time I fell in love with Luz Sosa, I was thirty-five and she was not quite twenty. I'd already known her for more than two years, ever since I'd been at Enoch Rivers Transcripts. I'd spotted her for a dyke when I went for my interview: a thin kid in glasses and a no-nonsense short haircut, with a buttery complexion and a world-class smile. Gail, the business's owner, had hired her as a messenger right out of high school and lucked into a stellar office manager.

Gail treated her, I thought, like taken-for-granted domestic help, showering capricious favors and confidences, professing to regard her as one of the family and in return expecting total loyalty and unlimited overtime. As business expanded, she delegated to Luz increasing levels of responsibility, often staying away from the office altogether. Luz dealt expertly with clients, getting them their jobs on time, sweet-talking them when a typist messed up or Gail had miscalculated how fast we could deliver. She printed and collated, arranged for messengers, repaired faulty equipment, installed computer software, transferred sound from video to audio cassettes, performed ASCII conversions. Perhaps her most important skill was her deft handling of the temperamental workforce. She scrounged for extra hands when unexpected jobs came pouring in; she quelled the cutthroat competition for any available scrap of work that always broke out in slow seasons.

Withal, she helped keep our funky female workplace rolling along in its guise as a cross between a live television talk show and an improvised soap opera. Would Gail (in her late thirties, with a daughter in junior high school) succeed in her quest to get pregnant by in vitro fertilization? Would Helen, a single mother with a strong southern accent who often spent her breaks in salacious colloquy with Luz, find sexual fulfillment with a teenage boy she fancied? Would Judy be let go? She was a weird and waspish Cuban (according to Luz, though she claimed to be Spanish) who quarreled with everyone and made paranoid speeches about forces of evil pervading the office, but typed some fabulous number of words per minute and never said no when Luz needed her to work all night on rushes.

Luz executed her masterly juggling act with the aid of an entourage of relatives and friends. Her cousin Sean was a messenger for a while. Her sister Debbie sometimes dropped by, infant in tow. Luz's great tragic love was a girl called Gloria ("I know she's straight but I like her, so I go after her"), who came around with her child-aunt, Milagros. Luz herself was always in motion; I'd watch her sprint across the room and slide into a corner of my desk to pick up the private phone line. One solid white-jeaned hip would be thrust in my line of vision, her key ring, clipped on a belt loop, bristling at my shoulder, while through an aural scrim of Pat Collins interviewing Plácido Domingo I'd hear her being multilingual in English: "I don't wanna hear no lies. Yolanda said *what?* You tell her this from me—hey, me voy, no, I gotta. Talk to you later, jerk. Hello, Enoch Rivers. Okay, fine, yes we do transcribe microcassettes. By messenger? Fine. Hold on one minute, please. Yes, hello. Hi, Zoe. Yeah, come in, I'm dyin', we're swamped, I've only got three people working right

now and CBS is sending twenty rushes. See ya in a few.” When she’d extinguished the blinking lights, she’d dash back to get the door, which would open on a messenger, his billed cap reversed, wearing fingerless gloves and a make-my-day expression, bearing yet another bulging Jiffy Pak.

There was another side to her that I saw glimpses of as she began to treat me as an occasional confidante. (She talked to Gail and Helen a lot, too, but they were straight and she seemed to value me for my Older Lesbian perspective.) This was the sad side, the overwhelmed side. Her large extended family, in East New York and New Jersey, seemed beset by all the famous crises of urban poverty and for Luz, it boiled down to the fact that people she loved kept dying. Trying to keep them alive, to mourn them properly, were tasks that would have flattened a weaker person.

Luz herself complained of headaches, took blood-pressure medication off and on. She didn’t like doctors. She showed me the blue underneath her fingernails, explained how she was born by caesarian. She’d gotten tangled in the cord and almost didn’t make it.

And there was something else, a tiny hole in her heart that made her sick a lot when she was little. They operated once but didn’t fix it. “I can’t even run a block, my heart goes nuts. It pounds like crazy too when I . . . when me and Gloria. . . . You know what I’m saying?”

She was coy about the language. Yet she’d tell me racy stories, how she and this Nicole got together last weekend, this cousin of her sister Debbie’s husband, up at Debbie’s apartment. Things were going good, but then Luz realized that they weren’t alone. Debbie’d lent a second bed to some guy. “*Excuse me*, but I was makin’ love to the girl.”

Of course I thought constantly of what passed between us in terms of the abstract categories—oppression, privilege—that governed my life in the women’s community. Yet I never spoke of this to her; it wasn’t her language. Given her staunchly apolitical posture, I figured I’d probably risk offending her by even bringing up the subject. She was Hispanic, not “Latina”; she shrugged at my Nicaragua trip; she was fluent in the clichés of bourgeois individualism. We were equal, color-blind, best leave it at that. The world of Enoch Rivers Transcripts, and Luz Sosa with it, remained aloof from the glaring light of politics, and even though I knew our differences mattered, I welcomed the shadowy refuge. Perhaps, I thought, things could happen in the dark, sheltered from paralyzing scrutiny.

She flirted outrageously. I knew it was just her way, that she got a little thrill from gently agitating women. I knew that it wouldn’t do to become invested in the effect her wandering hands and sexy talk had on me. But neither would it hurt to enjoy it, I decided.

“When I became gay—”

“Weren’t you born gay?” I teased.

“Well, okay, and then when I was little like I mentioned I was played with, which only encouraged me. But I mean when I came out. I had one teacher, this woman, she was all dyked out. . . . After that I was the teacher, understand?”

“I like straight women, did I ever tell you?”

She liked “hard” movies. *Rambo* was the best. *Gandhi* she pronounced “boring to the max.” She admitted taking in the occasional porn show. She followed masculine sports, preferred the *Post* to the *Daily News*. She claimed to be attracted to older women. Mature, intelligent. The type of girls who don’t say “fuck” every other sentence.

Once in the fall, a slow week in the office, the two of us were alone and talking gay girl talk. She explained to me how she thought about her walk, demonstrated the dip, the swagger. How she’d be on the street with Gloria on her arm and some asshole would make a comment. She’d be ready to kick ass, but Gloria wouldn’t let her: “Luz, come on, I’m scared.”

“I hate women,” she announced theatrically. “Yous lie and yous cheat and yous nag, nag, nag all the time.”

“Hey, who’s this *yous*? What happened to *us*? What makes you think you can separate yourself from the rest of the female race?”

“Because I’m Luz.” She flashed me a bad-boy grin. How I loved watching her go after what she wanted.

Since Luz was butch, that made me the femme. We were still only playing, but I thought about these things.

Les and I had long treated lightly the concept of roles. Perhaps we took them a bit more seriously now that there was such a vogue for them among the sexperts in our midst. We agreed that she was more butch in terms of certain mannerisms, what she called body language. But both in bed and in daily life we’d always basically adhered to the good old feminist idea that gender likeness, not cultivated contrast, was what attracted women to each other.

Luz seemed to think of herself as a moderate. She explained that she steered clear of what she called dykes, “you know, the kind that wear the men’s underwear.” And yet I guessed that she would want from me something rather like what I used to know how to do for men. She would want to take the lead, want to feel she was acting on me. To experience the skill of her aggression as the source of my desire.

With her, I experimented with a new relation to the “femininity” I’d been at war with since my teens. In this I was encouraged by the new feminist discourse that interpreted roles as erotic play with gender—and also by the fact that, like many a traveler, I felt that whatever happened didn’t count as me in quite the way my actions did when I was home. It was a slippery slope of sorts; I would eventually decide that if two women could play this game to their mutual satisfaction, without either being stigmatized as passive—if femme could be a role and not a fate—then maybe it needn’t demolish my self-respect to make love to a man I desired.

But I wasn’t thinking of men then, I was falling in love with Luz. I was daring myself to play at taking her flirting seriously. It seemed to make a kind of sense. I knew she was stuck on Gloria, but that didn’t prevent her frequent bragging about the other girls she bedded. I wanted more of the kind of heat I felt these days when she leaned her body close to mine as I sat at my workstation. Once she’d bent right over and kissed me on the mouth, leaving me stunned with lust yet not missing a word of Walter Cronkite pressing James Schlesinger about how close we came to a nuclear

exchange during the Yom Kippur War.

Reviewing my other crushes and the misery they'd brought, I decided Blake was right ("Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires"). I determined to *do something*.

She said of course she'd been feeling it too. Amid piles of transcripts, she said, "I can see myself all over you, I want to make love to you so much it hurts, I want to take you right here on this couch." Only later I'd wonder where she got such sentences, decide she might have cribbed them from a Silhouette Romance. Right then the move was effective, like they say in judo, my nerve endings on full alert. I was wet and longing to be alone with her, but the logistics proved daunting.

It was July, and Emma was conveniently at camp, but there was Les, and she'd made some rules. One of them was that nothing could happen in our apartment, even though she'd be out of town on the coming weekend. East New York wouldn't do—Luz lived with relatives—but at last it turned out that she had an invitation to house-sit for a woman her aunt babysat for.

That Friday evening near dusk, I parked on a quiet street near Brooklyn College. The house was huge on its narrow lot. Luz emerged barefoot on the porch, in a T-shirt and faded gym shorts. I felt overdressed, absurd, in an ironed shirt and careful earrings.

I'd called her at work that morning, hoping she'd say I could come in. "Nope, we're dead," she'd told me, then mentioned being hung over. She'd gone out with Gloria and gotten bombed.

We ended up in one of the twin living rooms, its dominant feature a wall-sized TV screen. Luz sank into an opulent settee and played with the remote. Enormous people towered over us, wearing Yankee uniforms. "Whoops, you don't like baseball," she observed cuttingly, switching to a rerun of "Bosom Buddies." Men in drag paraded around a set; the laugh track shrilled as wigs and falsies were snatched away.

Then she was drinking a Bud, standing up. I suggested my presence might be bothering her.

Nothing like that. She was tired. Her head hurt. She was getting cramps, it was that time of the month.

"So how did you happen to get so smashed last night?"

"I don't know. I didn't mean to. I kept saying let's leave, but she . . ." Luz illustrated with an elbow-bending gesture.

I'd never seen her like this. "Could you turn off the TV?"

"Why?"

"Look, should I leave?"

"Do you want to leave?"

"No."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want to be with you, make love with you."

She flicked off the lights, took my hand, and pulled me to my feet. To my surprise, I practically towered over her. At work I never noticed; I was always sitting down.

She got my clothes off in a hurry, then her own things. Disappeared between my open legs too fast. I've always been a little skittish about this operation, to me a

somewhat abstract, fleshless stimulus, the butterfly dance of tiny, potent parts. I like whole bodies doing things, deliberate hands. It makes me anxious to lie still and bask in pleasure.

Not that she wasn't mistress of a precocious, detached technique. Yet when I lifted her face to mine, it was a child's sweet mouth I kissed, a child's tender earlobes.

For a while now, deciphering her hints, her hazy boasts about making love to women, I'd wondered whether she modeled herself on the one-way butches of yesteryear. But she let me slide two fingers up inside her, moved against my hand while she continued tonguing me.

It went on for a while. I wasn't feeling much.

She stopped. I lay there on the expensive carpet. Then I heard her voice, sarcastic. "Not quite what you were expecting, I guess, was it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You know."

"Luz. But I'm not finished."

"I'm Puerto Rican and we have our pride."

I thought: a braver woman than I would laugh out loud.

We got into bed upstairs. She turned her back on me, and it felt as though we were settled lovers in the middle of a fight. I suggested she was fucking with my head, treating me like those women she'd told me about, the ones she used to sleep with and never see again.

When she heard me say I was leaving, she got all soft, contrite. "I'm really sorry. It's me and Gloria. She acts like she hasn't been with anyone in years. Then afterwards she calls me an animal, a pervert. Says she can't even remember the stuff I did to her, blames it on the booze. What can I do, Jan, I just love her so much."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I just figured it out. You know, I was lying here not feeling very good. I can't help it how I feel about satisfying a woman."

"But I didn't want to stop."

"I know. And then I realized—I feel disloyal *to her*. I'm sorry if this messes things up with you and Leslie."

"Never mind. It's easier this way."

I was angry at Luz, but I got over it. Mostly I was sad, with a bottomless sadness that came out of nowhere and attached itself to her, to the memory of her lying in the dark beside me and crossing herself and kissing her fingertips and dialing across the city and murmuring "M'hija, m'hija" into the telephone.

I saw how young she was, and that I'd pushed her too hard. It must have scared her silly to have me come at her like that—a grown-up; a model, married lesbian; a parent and published writer. I suspected that our unspoken differences had figured in the brief hostility she'd shown to me, an intimacy that was now safely buried as we resumed our roles of diligent typist and efficient office manager at a busy midtown tape transcription agency.

As I look back on these travels in desire, I'm reminded of Thoreau, who said that he had traveled a good deal in Concord. The depth of my ambivalence about ranging far

afraid wasn't just about the risk to my marriage (though that was certainly a big part of it, and I see my technical infidelity with Luz as a sort of clumsy practice for the full-blown affair I hadn't quite worked up to). It was about the propriety of my having desires at all, in the sense of needs that exceeded bare survival requirements and didn't demonstrably further the commonweal.

It would be too easy to dismiss this as political correctness. If some of my hesitations seem absurd in retrospect, I still think I was basically right to question the implications of my own privilege. In the world today, both travel and sex too often devolve into modes of casual consumption—of “eating the Other,” in bell hooks's striking phrase. What I want to know is how to hold onto both things at once—the critique and the necessity to act; to reach beyond oneself not out of duty but through passion, bearing in mind that action is always dangerous.

We live desire and politics as one, but our only language for them divides, prioritizes.

When I fell in love with Luz, I fell in love with her stories, redolent of worlds I had little access to, that seemed beautiful to me in their energy and harshness (whether or not I had a right to that perception). I imagined her as the hero of a documentary, longed to set down the grainy texture of her days. Yet I was a middle-class novelist and poet, she was a hardworking woman from a ravaged neighborhood. I knew I could be charged with being a tourist in her life, snapping mental pictures, jotting notes in my travel journal. Who was I to fasten her in language, annex her to my reality?

But in the end, when it was the only way to have her, I cast my scruples to the winds and wrote her down.

I Cross the Pass of Love

IN THE WAKE of the Luz fiasco, I informed Leslie that I had no intention of giving up the possibility of sleeping with other women. I felt sharply that what was at stake was less my happiness (nonmonogamy made me miserable, not happy) than some bedrock sense of an erotic self, of sexual personhood. I needed to feel alive in desire. Touching was believing. Without that faith I would not die, of course. But I wouldn't be whole, I wouldn't be me, I'd have yielded to the fate of "woman as lack" that had been the appalling subtext of my early gender education. For me, for good or ill, feeling like a sexual person was all bound up with creativity and freedom.

With Les, the old directness of my desire had been compromised—fatally, I believed—by what I called a lack of space, by festering angers and disappointments. Though we sometimes had sex, we had ceased to be lovers in the true sense of erotic co-conspirators. Yet I couldn't imagine losing my companionship with her, ceasing to discuss every scrap of our common life in a language we'd invented, that kept alive our shared past. I couldn't admit how the urge was growing in me to see what my life would look like if it were only mine, not ours.

During the mid-1980s, I consolidated the foundations of a new existence within the shell of the old while pushing aside any thought that my actions might be read as preparations for departure. Through my crushes and fantasies, I cultivated a private eros; through Central America work I entered a sphere of political action less directly linked to my lesbian identity—and more removed from Les's projects—than my earlier activism. My creative life, too, felt increasingly solitary. Les was battling depression in addition to a series of physical ills, and retreat to a private psychic territory, a "room of my own," offered some respite from the loneliness and panic I felt at unpredictable fluctuations in her energy and moods.

So often, looking back, I've asked myself why I couldn't be selfish sooner. I've thought that it would have been better for everyone involved if I'd cut and run instead of clinging to a cultural ideal of marital stability and my own myth of myself as Les and Emma's rescuer. I can see how my reluctant loyalty to a partner in emotional difficulties partly echoes my pattern with Sasha and Josh—and how the fact that this time I was older, and involved with a woman, made the stakes seem that much higher. Coming out had relieved me of lingering guilt feelings toward the boys I'd ditched in their hour of need only to impose an even graver responsibility toward women in general and certain ones in particular. And while the Cloud made me scoff at the former commitment, it did nothing to diminish my investment in the latter.

Beyond my powerful and complicated feelings for Les and Emma as individuals, being an empathetic partner and conscientious flommy signified, in my mind, being a *good* lesbian, which in turn meant that I was doing gender right, putting safely behind me the old self-hating equation of femaleness with disability. Perhaps even more important, it allowed me to feel effective—at least within the symbolically potent realm of my chosen family—at countering the world’s ravages, creating a zone of hope and solace. I desperately needed to be one of the repairers—part of the solution, the familiar slogan said. (In fact, my wish went deeper down than politics, all the way to ontology; at bottom, it concerned those dangerous cracks in being that I’d first become aware of as a child musing on hell and nuclear holocaust.) At the same time, I had other, conflicting needs that now refused to be ignored.

I had made the mistake, so common not just in dykedom but in most progressive circles, of moving from the crucial understanding that “we are all part of one another” (in the nonviolence activist Barbara Deming’s phrase) to a naive assumption that personal fulfillment will automatically square with collective goals. What I was going through in common with a lot of other lesbians was a growing need to reckon with the cost of ignoring feelings that didn’t jibe with our ideals. In divergent ways, the radical sexperts’ insistence that both body and psyche often resist our best-laid plans for them and the growing feminist interest in various forms of spiritual practice manifested this awareness.

For many of these seekers, myself included, Theodore Roethke’s line “I learn by going where I have to go” could have served as a watchword. Simultaneously, however, dykedom had adopted a formulaic new language for representing unsatisfied personal needs: that of addiction (or trauma) and recovery.

In the seventies, dykes had called themselves “Amazons,” invincible, one-breasted women warriors; now, many had retrenched, their ambition encapsulated in the AA slogan “one day at a time.” Feminists flocked to groups that legislated an embrace of powerlessness. Twelve-step programs proliferated surreally in women’s communities, not only for alcoholics and women with drug problems, but for incest survivors, those with eating disorders, sexual compulsives, “codependents,” and ACOA’s (adult children of alcoholics). Along with everything else came horrifying jargon: “I’m maintaining my abstinence around my sugar issues.”

To me, much of this was cultlike, distressingly reductive. I have never been one for monocausal explanations. I could certainly see that there were lesbians who needed to change their lives drastically in order to overcome dangerous addictions to drugs or alcohol. But could there really be so many ill among us?

I didn’t like the fascination with damage, the confessional overtones of what sometimes shaded into a medicalized version of “cleaning up one’s act.” Like the craze for nurturing, the lesbian recovery culture paradoxically appropriated a deleterious gender stereotype (female = vulnerable, victimized) as the basis for a wildly influential feminist metaphor.

I mistrusted groupthink. I’d had enough of systems. Still, I might have successfully ignored most of this, as I’d done with other dykely trends I disapproved of, if Les herself hadn’t found the metaphor increasingly persuasive.

I'm aware that I have my own psychological motivations for regarding the recovery culture with distaste despite my familiarity with cases in which it did help women to move bravely through hard times and come out the other side. One of the clearest illustrations of my constitutional aversion to adopting the identity of "survivor" even when it seemed most warranted is the way I responded to being attacked and almost raped in June 1984, shortly before my first trip to Nicaragua.

It happened on a Saturday in midafternoon, as I began my regular run around Prospect Park. I was heading downhill on Flatbush Avenue, with the park on one side and the Brooklyn Botanic Garden on the other. Pedestrian traffic on this strip is often sparse to nonexistent. Drivers hurtle by cradled in a dream of speed, oblivious to untoward occurrences on the sidewalk.

He tackled me from behind, locked his forearm around my throat, and dragged me into the urban forest through a gap in the wrought-iron fence, one of many breaks, resulting from decades of hard usage, that the Parks Department hadn't gotten around to patching.

Strong men are incredibly strong: that's one thing I knew afterward. The way he handled me felt omnipotent. I wasn't even a grown woman but a child with a murderous father, face down beneath the trees in mud and underbrush, wavering in and out of consciousness as the pressure on my carotid artery cut the blood flow to my brain, a fragment from a poem hanging suspended there, above my struggle in the wet leaves so far from other help: *She fought him off and she lived*, a line from a Susan Griffin piece that Les had included in one of her collections. I forced myself (I remember: choice, not reflex) to scream and scream again, though he promised that he'd *really hurt me* if I did, and I longed for the nothingness it was torture to resist.

And when he gave up—inexplicably, I felt, convinced as I was of his power—I stumbled through the woods and through the fence in terror of his return, and found myself on the margin of zipping traffic, facing the dilemma of persuading city drivers that a woman naked but for a bra and running shoes and yelling "Help! Help!" was not a confirmed lunatic but a temporary victim, amenable to rescue.

In the aftermath, I felt stunned but determined to proceed, not to make too big a deal of what had happened, or of how it recalled the occasion in my early twenties when I'd been attacked by a stranger on a Portland street, that time raped for real. I think I sensed that my old anxieties, my childhood view of the world as a dangerous place, could engulf me if I weren't careful. Those childhood terrors had been deeply gendered, had in fact included fears of bad men lurking in the woods, and to give in to them threatened to relegate me to the realm of helpless femininity I dreaded as much as violence.

My heroines (for whatever this says about me) were still the defiant ones. I favored those who kept moving, dealt with damage on the road, like Luz, whose plucky stance had much to do with her attraction for me. I agreed with Maud, who remarked of a book of essays by yet another squeaky-clean dyke feminist, "The trouble with these girls is they don't believe in the tragedy of life. Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers do, and I love them for it." I wanted *less* sobriety and uplift. I didn't want to recover from anything.

Les reacted strangely to the park attack. I needed her to empathize, of course, but also to cope while I regrouped. Instead, she seemed to crumple inwardly, so identified with me that she absorbed the blow directly, and I found myself having to comfort *her*.

This was just one sign out of many that she was having a tough time. Over the previous year or two she'd gradually developed chronic problems with her physical health, including frequent visitations by a mysterious virus that we speculated might be connected to the anxieties of the Cloud and the stress of writing about controversial aspects of Jewish identity, the Middle East, and race. While her writing process was never easy, her work on this piece was especially torturous, and she dealt with the anxiety of authorship by showing multiple drafts of each chapter to trusted readers, hoping by incorporating huge numbers of comments not simply to hone her prose but to immunize her arguments against hostile readings. She leaned on me as her resident editorial consultant, a role I strove to fill despite conflicted feelings: I was genuinely excited by the project, uneasily compelled by the need to demonstrate that the Cloud had not diminished my commitment to fighting anti-Semitism, exhausted by contemplation of anguished histories and an obsessive authorial method.

As her text took final shape, Les contracted yet another minor respiratory infection. One afternoon she had trouble breathing. Shirley Wilkes and I rushed her to the nearest emergency room where I told the nurses that I was her sister so they'd let me stay with her. The evening hours passed as she lay on a gurney, gasping, barely able to talk. The staff essayed random medications. A resident was talking respirators when he finally got lucky with some injection or other and she began to breathe more normally. I'd been terrified, and was only partly reassured when her trusted internist agreed with the hospital's belated explanation that a vocal cord had swelled, putting pressure on her windpipe.

The episode, unimportant in itself—"not life-threatening," the doctor insisted—was one of many times when I felt frightening, solitary, possibly exaggerated responsibility for the well-being of a loved one whom I could not really help. In the winter following the emergency room visit, she required major surgery for a benign uterine growth. But what alarmed and puzzled me more than her string of illnesses was her deepening though intermittent depression, which she seemed determined to bear stoically, without resort to a psychotherapist—somebody, she insisted, who was only paid to care. While she talked to several trusted friends about emotional issues, I was the only one who saw close up, day in and day out, what was going on with her. I alone knew how bad things really were at times.

But how bad is bad? I wasn't sure what to think. Aware that she was determined to carry on as normally as possible, I often ended up trying to cover for her, to prevent Emma and others from noticing when she hit another trough of misery.

Though convinced it was only the cladding of her pain, I still took personally her scorn for common social intercourse. It surfaced in small, debilitating ways, like the time we ran into two lit biz acquaintances in a gay bookstore. Just as I started to enjoy talking shop and to hope that the four of us might go out for coffee, I noticed that Les was looking offended and answering friendly questions with words of one syllable. Embarrassed and disappointed, I cut the conversation short. When we were alone and I asked her what had happened, she replied that being recognized for her literary

accomplishments made her uncomfortable. In any event she didn't want to waste her time chatting with people who meant nothing to her.

Since our breakup, there's been a lot of popular press attention to the strain depression places on family relationships, and every time I read an article on the subject, I wonder why I didn't insist on my perception that something major was going wrong, that Les had to get help. At the time, my own stoical tendencies made it seem sensible to soldier on and hope for the best.

"It's interesting not to be in love w/ anybody," I noted in July 1986, the anniversary of the Luz debacle. Not being in love was good for my work; it let me concentrate. I'd begun a new novel, and was enjoying a slow infusion of recognition from *Sinking, Stealing*'s publication the year before. I was still earning my keep at Enoch Rivers, while Leslie did freelance work for the Board of Education. We continued to be involved politically with what we called our respective "spheres of noninfluence," the Middle East and Central America.

Brooklyn CISPES had fizzled, and I'd joined the newly formed Brooklyn Nicaragua Sister City Project, part of a nationwide network of efforts to link specific localities north and south in a people-to-people approach to solidarity. We were starting to raise money for a potable water system for our tiny sibling, San Juan del Río Coco, an effort that the San Juaneños had prioritized since their contaminated drinking supply led to high rates of illness and infant mortality. We asked Community Board 6 in downtown Brooklyn to recognize the sister city relationship. Although the board turned us down, the campaign for recognition allowed us to publicize our support for a Central American revolution. So did the noisy parade we held on July 19, the anniversary of the Sandinista Triumph. ("Clean water in Nicaragua!" a bystander sneered, "what about in Brooklyn?" Our point exactly; solidarity meant seeing how ordinary people in both locations could change the world for the better.)

In May, Les had spent an introspective week in Maine, writing and walking on the beach. During this time she mulled over a childhood memory of having been sexually abused by an adult acquaintance. While she'd never entirely wiped it from her mind, she'd also never acknowledged the deep significance such an event might have. Now she talked it over with her friend Mariah, a sober, AA-going alcoholic. Les, who herself never touched alcohol, began to identify her own chaotic, painful state of mind with Mariah's descriptions of what it meant to be "in recovery." The life of a dedicated activist, a woman who'd once worried that a week's vacation in the woods might be more free time than she could handle, now took a decidedly contemplative turn.

In the months to come, we'd develop vocabulary for an eerie remoteness that came over her in spells. I could detect it at a glance in the grim set of her features, hear it in the coldness with which she responded to routine efforts at communication. "You're not *here*," I'd say, and she'd agree, "No, I can't be there right now. I guess I need to be by myself tonight."

I felt that I should welcome her embrace of the tenets, if not the form (for she never actually joined a twelve-step program), of the recovery movement. I knew she needed to get a purchase on the pain that lurked beneath the crust of her efficient,

rational manner, and I couldn't claim I knew how best to do that. Maybe it required putting everything else on hold, diving headfirst into the facts of injury. But "recovering" wasn't simply a new language, it was a whole new identity, and one, as I've said, that made me profoundly uneasy, not least because of its potential to reduce the wide perplexities of grief to a narrow formula. Even as I tried to be supportive, I felt that I had two choices: to accompany her into this new experience, immersing myself, albeit vicariously, in the recovery culture, or to stay put and watch her drift away.

Except that of course I myself wasn't exactly standing still, what with all that ambivalent travel I'd been up to.

In August we spent our customary weeks in Vermont, and as usual life seemed easier amid the flatly uncommercial beauty of our cow-scented refuge. We worked in the mornings, drove to town in the afternoons, ran miles on unpaved roads where we met no traffic but farm equipment. After dinner I would sometimes venture out to the weedy pond, my arrival heralded by the mighty splashing of many frogs taking cover. I'd sit on the rotting dock as darkness fell, watching swallows dive and dart in the air above. On the night of a nearly full moon I headed out without a flashlight, following a tractor route through the uncut hay. From the crest of the hill I could see our huddled house, its blunt two stories sheltered by old trees and pierced by the simple geometric forms of a couple of lighted windows. At a distance stood the skeletons of barns, unused except for storage. Moonglow covered the pond like the skin on top of pudding.

These summer sojourns in lightly cultivated country always seemed to me like partial compensation for my exile from the forests of the west. They soothed me from the rigors of the city, yet felt painfully elegaic. I couldn't, can't, distinguish love from mourning, knowing that Earth's body is besieged, pocked with the lesions of production and consumption run amok.

Much as I treasured our escapes from Brooklyn, I knew I didn't want to move. I found it ironic that Les, who'd sung the praises of Park Slope, who'd taught me the gritty charms of the Lower East Side, now hated the city. More and more she gravitated to Albany, where living costs were low, the pace more manageable, the country close at hand. She'd be near friends, including Mariah. I was not impressed by our state capital, with its hideous array of obsidian monoliths in place of a city center. Brooklyn, with all its noisy faults, was mine; my friends and work were there, or in Manhattan. I'd put too much effort into the Big Apple to give it up for horrifying winters, swarms of political hacks, and ethnic restaurants that specialized in either baked ziti or chop suey.

We talked about a commuting relationship. I didn't like the thought of our not having a shared home, but increasingly I found that I couldn't visualize what sort of home we'd have post-Emma, anyway. She was now a high school junior, would be off to college soon, and I dreaded the prospect of being alone with Les when the bleakness descended on her.

There were moments in which I perceived very clearly that we were leaving each other. Yet as people often do on the brink of disturbing change, I engaged in a sort of emotional double-bookkeeping, taking comfort in routine as though it guaranteed

duration. We'd been through thin and thin together, and by now our long companionship was simply monumental, like a great old dying tree that towers over sturdier saplings. Perhaps it ought to come down, but not today.

I couldn't *decide* to leave her. I'd require an act of God of the emotions, an erotic tornado, typhoon, or hurricane, to pick me up and whirl me through the air and set me down in another place.

We spent a grim winter, full of Les's depression and a struggle with our landlord, Mr. Murray, over heat. The boiler crashed directly after New Year's. It had happened before, but now, as days went by and the radiators slumbered, it dawned on us that Murray, who lived on the floor beneath us, was flat broke and couldn't afford repairs. "Her moods, the weather, the lack of heat, space—it all blurs together," I recorded. "I am so angry sometimes at circumstances, at the claustrophobic family milieu." The poorly insulated front rooms, including my bedroom-study, took on a Siberian aspect and had to be sealed off. We fought the chill in the rest of the apartment by running the oven and plugging in space heaters that taxed the feeble wiring to the limit. We summoned building inspectors, took turns yelling at Mr. Murray. In injured tones, he informed us that he was just as cold as we were.

Heat finally returned at the start of February. As spring approached, Les's spirits seemed to lift. By the end of March I noted the great relief of her "resurgence." In May she rented a cheap one-bedroom apartment in Albany. We'd agreed that she'd spend regular time upstate but would still be based in Brooklyn until Emma finished high school. A year from now, we'd figure out the next step.

In mid-June we celebrated our twelfth anniversary. I recorded that Les was upbeat about her work and the Albany place and I was feeling a "wonderful sense of completion . . . that we've weathered the recent storms & are still crazy about each other."

Weeks later, I'd fly to a war zone and back. I'd lie on my bed in Brooklyn in stupefying heat, Benjamin beaming at me through the shadows, moving in me, inquiring so naively, "Are you as happy right now as I am?"

My second trip to Nicaragua differed markedly from the first, both because it had more specific political goals and because by the summer of 1987 the country's situation was far grimmer than it had been three years earlier. While North Americans' involvement in revolutionary politics there continued to be laced with the contradictions of our "chele" or gringo status, any aura of radical chic had effectively been dispelled by the exhaustion of prolonged violence and the devastating effects of a U.S. trade embargo on an already fragile Third World economy. Though a revolution on the ropes doesn't cease to be heroic, it certainly isn't very glamorous. As poet Ernesto Cardenal observed, empty shelves in the markets had become the emblem of Sandinista fortitude.

This time I traveled with a Brooklyn Sister City Project group, the first to visit San Juan, whose location a scant twelve miles from the Honduran border put it deep within the war zone. I'd been working with the project's Women's Committee, which designated me as its representative on the trip. I was to carry messages of support from Brooklyn women and bring back information on the campesinas' daily lives to

help us in our educational work and in the planning of material aid projects specifically geared to rural women's needs. Of course I'd also be involved in the delegation's overall objectives: laying the foundations of what we hoped would be lasting friendship and conferring about progress on the clean water system for which we'd been doing the bulk of our fund-raising. Thus we hoped to move reality an inch or two closer to our optimistic slogan: "Brooklyn: A City at Peace with Nicaragua."

Our group of eleven was met in Managua by a former New Yorker who worked for the Ministry of Agrarian Reform in the San Juan area. Karen was one of those intense young North Americans who poured everything they had into support for Sandinismo. Her talk was of the latest mortar attacks and of her concern for Patio Grande, a tiny settlement just outside San Juan that had been brutalized by contras back in April. She reassured us that the ESLN, the Sandinista army, had excellent knowledge of the enemy's whereabouts and wouldn't let us proceed beyond the northern city of Estelí if they thought the risk excessive. Assuming we in fact made it as far as San Juan, our stay would be brief, in part because of safety considerations, but also to minimize the strain of hospitality on the local people who'd have to feed and house us. We'd spend the balance of our ten-day trip traveling.

During our brief initial stay in Managua, it became clear to me that Benjamin, a taciturn lawyer originally from Grenada, and Ollie, a blue-eyed, bearded college teacher, were my favorites among the delegation members. I liked their commitment to acknowledging complications, their cultivation of a sense of irony to put starch in their ideals. In short, they were radical grown-ups, immune to the sentimental boosterism that I'd rebelled against in women-only groups and was now encountering in different forms all over the "mixed" left. It amused me to find myself in the unusual situation of seeking out the company of men.

I couldn't help but be aware how solidarity was haunted by the deep historical inequalities that we were trying to put an end to, and I wondered how Benjamin viewed our enterprise. Apart from him and one other Black man, the delegation was all white. He came from a tiny, exploited country that had recently suffered a U.S. invasion, and while I didn't yet know how personally devastated he'd been by the bloody collapse of the Grenadian revolution, I imagined he might feel more directly implicated than other members of our group in the events we were witnessing. As a lesbian among straights, I too felt marginal, and began to sense a nameless—and, I assumed, transitory—affinity stemming from our so very different differences.

As the time approached to head up to San Juan, the atmosphere grew tense. We were all affected not only by the prospect of traveling to an area where contra ambushes were common, but by our awareness of the tasks that lay ahead—not least the feat of bonding instantly with people whose customs we didn't know, whose language we barely spoke, and who were in constant danger of torture and death because of our government's actions. After hours of traveling in an open truck over rough, rutted roads, we arrived in the green, hilly town where red-scarved children from the Sandinista youth organization welcomed us with a simple ceremony. We were immediately enveloped in campesino hospitality and the San Juaneños' disarming willingness to accept us as friends and allies.

Later, exhausted and giddy with relief at having made it this far, we attended a makeshift disco at the local school. There I danced a slow number with Benjamin and

noted for the first time on this trip the symptoms of “desire under pressure,” which I dismissed as some sort of erotic hallucination, possibly an effect of raging hormones combined with the volatile emotions of the day. I couldn’t possibly be *really* attracted to a man. The very idea was so far-fetched that I felt safe in fantasizing, sure that it couldn’t lead to anything. And yet the dreamlike sensation of bodily recognition that I’d experienced as we briefly held each other, our small frames nearly identical in size, seemed perfectly in tune with the surreal experience of finding myself in the Nicaraguan campo, dancing in the middle of a war.

That night I was billeted with another delegation member in the home of a local matron, a Sandinista grandmother who proudly showed us her party identification and told stories of her role in the insurrection against Somoza, the ins and outs of which taxed my Spanish comprehension. On the following day, we trucked up to Patio Grande.

We spent two nights in the tiny community, an “asentamiento” (resettlement center) for rural families, some of whom had left even more dangerous areas of the war zone. The mountainous land was excellent for coffee cultivation, but the people were traumatized. In the contra attack, which we heard about from survivors, a teacher had been killed while firing on the invaders from the health center. An agricultural technician told how he’d hidden in the rafters of a building used for child care. He’d breathed through bullet holes in the zinc roof to avoid asphyxiation as the “freedom fighters” burned the co-op’s pride and joy, a brand-new supply truck. They danced around for a time shooting celebratory rounds and calling on the farmers to surrender. After gorging on jam discovered in a storeroom, they melted into the lush greenery, leaving the survivors to collect their dead and wounded.

As affected as I was by the stories of heroism and the loss of young lives (the teacher’s death was not unusual, for the contra often targeted educators and health care workers), I was even more struck by certain minor incidents. How the youngsters went wild over unaccustomed luxuries (a bright balloon, a snapshot from an instant camera) that no U.S. kid, however poor, would have given a second glance; how their parents, who sometimes appeared to be in shock, cheered up when they envisioned farming this rich land in peacetime; how a community worker held up the scrapbook I’d presented as a gift from the Brooklyn Women’s Committee and read aloud our basic Spanish greetings to young mothers who’d fallen through the cracks of the revolution’s ambitious literacy campaign. Our hosts beseeched us to pass on their stories: “If the U.S. people know what’s going on in Nicaragua, then they will stop the war!”

What moved me in Patio Grande was how hard people try. To stay alive. To really live. How the lavishly funded project of eradicating hope keeps being sabotaged by undernourished volunteers. “Hay que ponerse las pilas,” the Sandinistas said. Put in your batteries. Get cracking.

It wasn’t that politics were any more straightforward there. Making change is never easy, and there are those who now think that agrarian policy was the Achilles’ heel of the Nicaraguan revolution. It’s just that in Patio Grande you could see: people want to stay alive. They want their kids to read and write. And for a moment you lost your grip on all the tricky ironies, all the reasons why simple justice has to be so complicated.

During our two nights in Patio Grande, as I lay on a shared cot listening to desultory gunfire (perfectly harmless, my host family said, just “undisciplined compañeros” discharging their AK-47s), I found my thoughts returning to that dance with Benjamin. During the days I was much too busy to examine the prickly self-consciousness I felt in his vicinity. But in a group photograph posed in front of the wrecked supply truck, I appear planted possessively beside him.

On the ride back down from San Juan to Estelí, we stood together in the open truck bed making awkward conversation. I bristled at his questions about my writing, as I often did when straights politely inquired what my books were about. I was sure they didn’t really want to hear about my lesbian themes and characters.

Once we were out of the war zone and checked into a hotel—how luxurious! a bed for every sleeper!—he sought me out and nervously suggested that we might take a walk. We dawdled along the poorly paved and dimly lighted streets of a “city” that was really just a stubborn little cow-and-coffee town—Estelí heroico, bombed by Somoza, now the rearguard of the front line in a very dirty war. Benjamin said that he was attracted to me. He hoped I wouldn’t be angry, he knew I was with a woman. I admitted that I’d been surprised by my feelings at the dance, but said I could never be involved with him. Leslie would never forgive my making love with a man, I said. It was, I’m sure, the only hesitation I felt, the only fact of my regular life that still computed amid the intimate Spanish of a few pedestrians returning from work, of women sitting out in front of ancient attached houses with thick walls, tiny windows, and great doors like the mouths of caves.

Later, dodging the rest of the delegation, we adjourned to the empty hotel restaurant, which, thanks to the ubiquitous shortages, served almost no food and raised its prices constantly to keep pace with horrifying, Weimar-style inflation. But there was still beer from the national brewery. Feeling decadent, we ordered two bottles.

All sisterly good advice, I suggested to Benjamin, who confessed he thought he was falling in love with me, that this attraction probably meant he was ready for intimacy and might arrange to have that sort of feeling for someone more available.

After that night, we spent much of our time together, as the delegation, relieved and a little punchy at having successfully completed its mission in San Juan, relaxed into a less pressured schedule of meetings with government officials and visits to sites of political interest. I liked Benjamin’s personal reticence, the clarity he brought to our group’s discussions of matters of principle, his determined training for the New York Marathon, getting up at first light to run ten miles before breakfast. (In Patio Grande, of course, we couldn’t leave the area, and he’d been reduced to charging up and down a muddy hill.) In a situation of enforced togetherness, he projected an air of permanent solitude, often whistling or singing to himself.

He actively pursued me, and I enjoyed that to the hilt; it’s something I’ve experienced very infrequently in my life. The dramatic struggles we’d just visited had induced in me a reckless urge to experiment. My normal life seemed a million miles away. While we remained in Nicaragua, the implications of my attraction, including the puzzling gender of its object, simply didn’t have to matter.

For several days our courtship proceeded with a strangely old-fashioned sedateness and restraint compelled by the proximity of the rest of the delegation. We were never alone together. At times our friend Ollie functioned as a sort of unwitting chaperone, our threesome wandering off from the rest of the group, but except for that hour or two in Estelí, there'd been little chance to exchange confidences.

As the date of our return flight approached, I grew desperate for a chance to talk to Benjamin alone. On our last night in Managua, he offered to take me out to dinner, but I blanched at the suggestion of conventional gallantry (not to mention the likelihood of running into our comrades, given the very limited choice of restaurants). For lack of real privacy, we ended up wandering in the airport and it seemed that what I wanted was not talk after all, but to see if what I'd felt up in San Juan had been a fluke.

It hadn't. Our bodies still pretended to know each other from some inconceivable prior incarnation. "Compañeros, please," the polite young soldier said, ousting us from the dark corner where we were making out like teenagers on a park bench. "This is a restricted area." Benjamin recklessly suggested going back to his hotel room, but we both realized that his roommates might return at any moment. In any event, I wasn't up for it, for the risk of HIV and pregnancy. Above all, I knew that if we had "intercourse" (what a strange, strange word and concept), I'd have to inform Leslie right away.

I arrived in New York in a panic, but determined to hold myself together until Les's departure for the New Jewish Agenda national conference, which began just a few days after my return. I thought that her absence would afford me time to sort out my feelings, to become, as the saying goes, "myself" again. But I also planned to see Benjamin. He'd made me promise to call him once we got back and arrange a date for dinner.

At first the meeting was stiff; we were strangers once more, embarrassed at having gotten carried away. But over the restaurant meal we managed to loosen up a little, and afterward I invited him to walk me back to my apartment. We sat down sedately on the living room couch, and I went over again why I couldn't make love with him. Infidelity with a woman was one thing, I said, but in my lesbian world sleeping with a man was an unpardonable offense. So Les, at least, would look at it.

"Well, maybe we'd better each stick to our own kind," he said, and the lonely ring of it, the layered ironies, the fact that I saw he was principled enough not to push me any further, had me reaching out for him, dizzy with desire but level-headed enough to insist on an excursion to buy condoms we would later neglect to use.

In hindsight, it seems so clear what I was up to: step by step, meticulously, as if I'd consciously planned it out, I was arranging to make it worse to stay with Leslie than to leave her. I couldn't go until I'd organized such torment that our breakup would be the lesser evil. And I could not tell myself what I was doing. I was Jan Clausen, lesbian feminist, proud campaigner against all forms of feminine servitude. Yet I had not learned to say: *I want this*. I remarked to a friend, who should have laughed in my face and didn't, that I hoped that enacting my passion with Benjamin once or twice might be enough to last me.

The strangeness of my finding with a man the sex I'd been looking for—not to mention the strangeness of encountering his body (other, familiar, bristling with symbols)—was something I at first thought about only glancingly, I had so many other worries. After we slept together I compared it in my journal to committing “the sin against the holy ghost,” yet noted that it didn't feel like sin—not, that is, on account of gender. Part of what I meant was that I felt no less a lesbian, though I did believe that I'd sinned against Leslie by sharing with Benjamin an intensity that for me could never be *merely* physical.

Les, all trusting, returned from her conference. I had to tell her; I told her. In the aftermath of that harrowing reunion, I found myself thinking once more in Christian images, remembered the Ballad of the House Carpenter from a Joan Baez recording. The song closes with the house carpenter inquiring of the woman he's run away with what hills they spy in the distance. She answers him tenderly: “Those are the hills of Hell, my love, where you and I must go.” I felt then that I understood completely the terrible concept of eternal punishment for yielding to forbidden desire, not because I cared for divine or human rules, but because it seemed so hellish to knowingly wound an innocent.

At the same time, I was cruelly direct, telling Les of my “overdetermined defiance” (of lesbian public opinion, racial taboos, middle-class prudence and planning). Desperate to hold her own balance, she tried reason alternating with the rawest of emotions. Sometimes she sensibly proposed contingency planning (how would we arrange care of Emma and handle finances if we broke up?); sometimes she treated me like a wayward child; sometimes she badgered me with grievances. (“Fornication! With a Man! In our Home!” I angrily parodied.)

It galled me that she kept telling me who I was, reproaching me not merely with the pain I was causing her, which seemed to me to be her right, but with my inconsistency. She accused me of straying from the outline of some supposed true self. “He's even more unsuitable for you than Luz,” she taunted, adding that, while Luz was no intellectual, Benjamin couldn't enter my world of feminism. The comment left me almost speechless with rage. Who was she to specify suitable desire? I felt as though I were fifteen again, with my mother insisting that the world was flat and the rude boy I fancied would lure me over the edge. (But of course Les was right: dykedom *was* flat, and in the end I fell off, precisely as she'd predicted.)

I promised I wouldn't make any snap decisions. We began to talk as though apocalypse might be averted. We headed off to spend August in the country, house-sitting for a time in upstate New York, then adjourning to Vermont, more or less sustained by the centripetal habits of companionship that the married appeal to in centrifugal circumstances. Yet it was horribly confining to be round-the-clock companions just when I so needed privacy, and misery to be so far from Benjamin, whom I couldn't write or phone without Les's knowledge.

I couldn't sleep. I'd fall into bed exhausted, wake up wired in the wee hours, arise at six or so, looking aged and dissolute. I had never in my life taken sleeping medication; now I borrowed Les's pills. Everything was awful yet far away. I knew there'd been important developments in the Central American peace process but couldn't force myself to pay attention to nightly newscasts.

When we left the Vermont farmhouse late in August, I knew it might be for good. I had loved it there; it had symbolized to me everything blameless, deserving of protection. It was connected to my hope that in taking care of Leslie, I might in some mysterious way help to mend the shattered world. Now I was on the verge of leaving her, and it brought me face to face with a vision of myself as one of the destroyers.

We returned to the city, having negotiated ground rules to manage the situation while we tried to work things out. Les consented to my pursuing a friendship with Benjamin, on condition that we consorted only in public places and didn't get physical. I promised her I wouldn't "do anything" without informing her in advance, and I kept my promise except for once in a public garden that he and I visited over Labor Day weekend. I've always wondered how we looked to passersby, two fully clothed grown-up people, dark and pale, almost devouring each other behind some bushes. Our otherwise exemplary abstinence merely transferred erotic focus from "acts" to gestures. Like a single bite of food to an anorexic, quick hello hugs and kisses of farewell acquired fierce significance.

In October, Les, Emma, and I drove down to attend the national March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. I dreaded the whole thing, wished it wasn't happening, yet felt I had to go. It was too important an event for me to shirk just because my personal life was in a mess. Besides, I feared my absence might be misinterpreted. Not many people knew that Les and I were in difficulties, but I wanted those who did to see me there. Les, who'd organized a gay and lesbian havdalah (the service marking the end of Shabbat) for the night before the march, had found us beds in a friend's apartment.

People in Groups were torture to me that weekend. I longed for solitude like an opiate. I escaped for a while to the National Gallery, looked at paintings by Berthe Morisot. Whatever her problems as a woman artist, they seemed fantastically remote from mine. I went to the havdalah, watched Les preside; she looked brittle, but pulled it off magnificently. I smiled at all the people who expected it of me when they said what a terrific job she'd done. That night we had to share a bed, though we were barely speaking. With Emma present, it was family as usual.

The day of the march was one of the strangest of my life, its rituals and objectives achingly familiar, yet closed off from me. So many times I'd been to Washington demonstrations, those grand family reunions of the left, with their atmosphere of some funky afterlife in which the soul is reunited with apparitions from every cranny of its past. Once again I was seeing ghosts, and they seemed to recognize me, but of course they didn't know what I was thinking.

The three of us ran into Sarah and Pat, friends of ours from the Bay Area. Les and I thought of them as iconoclasts like us; they edited an unorthodox lesbian publication, and Sarah had published a very good book about doing solidarity work in Nicaragua.

We decided to stand on the curb and just watch for a while. AIDS organizations were filling the street, displaying a new militance. Many demonstrators were in wheelchairs. Sarah and Pat discussed an acquaintance. "I haven't seen her," Pat said. "I don't know if she's coming. I've heard some rumors. She might be going straight."

Sarah made a face. "Time will tell. You know what I've noticed, though? They tend to come back."

It was such a simple exchange, so casually uttered—for Pat and Sarah, of no consequence. For me, it marked the formal ending of an epoch. I’m not here, I thought, I’m not part of this, a feeling that was all the stronger because the comment sounded like something I myself might have said just a few months before. And because I might have said it, I knew what it implied: that lesbian existence was a secular state of grace, that sleeping with a man was “going away,” that in doing so, an “us” becomes a “them,” estranged from all those who matter.

The entire day was a huge celebration of a tribe I was about to be kicked out of. I focused on getting through it: just a few hours more. I kept running into old acquaintances, having to reiterate that this event was wonderful, marvelous, inspiring—how fantastic, how historic, that “we” were here in such numbers. Each smile of greeting, each hug, was an ordeal. Shirley spoke at the rally; I couldn’t retain a word. At last it got to be late in the afternoon, and Emma and I could leave. Les, thank God, would be staying another night. She was with a group that was going to do C.D. on the steps of the Supreme Court on Monday morning.

I couldn’t bear the dividedness any longer. I couldn’t live with my own duplicity, which, though I’d been entirely too “honest” with Les, only intensified as I strove to placate her. I had no guarantee, only very modest hopes, that Benjamin and I could be lovers in the real world. I didn’t know him yet. But I had to try.

I left, in the end, because I couldn’t bear confinement. I left because my future was dying and I had to rescue it. I left because I felt like that Sandinista agitator, up against the roof, breathing through a bullet hole. I left because I needed a life of my own.

I decided late in October, while Les was in Albany. We’d rehearsed so thoroughly that the real thing felt oddly truncated. Even telling Emma was quick, though hideous. She cried a little and asked to be left alone. (Much later, she’d remember it like this: “I’m sitting watching television, just like any other evening, and my parents, who I’ve never seen have fights—you guys *never* fought around me, I never knew *anything* was wrong—come out and tell me my family is over.”)

We’d agreed that I’d stay with Emma half the time, which meant I needed a place to crash when Les was with her. Soon I’d rented a tiny hall bedroom in the sort of shared apartment that Benjamin calls a “group home.” My roommates were a vivacious feminist, her quiet economist husband, their infant son, and a gay Jewish South African man who worked as an urban planner. The household was cluttered and cheerful, full of infant accessories and energetic discussions of Jewish leftist politics. Adam, the urban planner, was friendly and tolerant; his sense of humor was a boon to me. After our Thanksgiving dinner, he told me that a gay friend of his who’d been present had mistaken Benjamin, introduced as my guest, for a *really* butch lesbian.

I grew attached to my minimalist refuge, which offered a welcome break from the history that besieged me when I was on Eleventh Street with Emma. It didn’t matter when I heard the baby crying, roommates fighting or fornicating: I wasn’t responsible. That room was all mine, with its single window looking south to rooftops timeless in the thin blue light of winter, its borrowed metal typing table, an uncomfortable straight-backed chair, and the eggplant-colored futon on which Benjamin and I at last reconsummated our romance interruptus.

I was always comparing in those days. Heterosex is so absurdly plot-driven: tension, rising action, climax, resolution. Contraception is such a hassle (and hadn't improved in twenty years). Men's beard stubble is so scratchy, their fear of emotions so transparent. Some of them still hate to see a woman cry. They fail to share one's most basic conditions of embodiment—monthly bleeding, yeast infections, breasts that jiggle when not restrained—let alone the powerful feelings that go with them. So much effort is consumed in tedious explanations, so much simply goes unsaid.

We were very careful, getting into things. Benjamin was ardent, but also formal and cautious, stubbornly attached to an old-world standard of privacy. ("Americans," he grumbled, "spill their guts to anybody.") His reserve sometimes hurt me, but overall it helped. It is not a wise thing to begin a new love before finishing with the old one, and I was frequently detained in a place of guilt and grief.

My strongest image of that winter is of dancing in the dark, alone in the living room of my makeshift lodging. When my roommates were out, I regressed shamelessly, "twirling" in tight circles in the middle of the floor, the way I used to listen to records as a child, aiming for a moment of orgasmic dizziness. I'd discovered Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* album, released long ago but new to me since I'd stopped listening to rock around the time I left Portland. I drowned myself in the rue of "Tangled up in Blue," savored the way "You're a Big Girl Now" refreshed the overworked themes of pop tragedy: "Like a corkscrew to my heart / Ever since we've been apart." I wept and wept, thinking of Les, who'd made it clear she wanted nothing further to do with me. Precisely. Like a corkscrew.

Yet I felt freer than I had in years. No penance could atone for the crime of my relief.

Floating Woman

MORE THAN A DECADE has gone by since I sailed off the edge of my world, ten years of having borne in upon me at random moments the recollected texture of an all-important relationship now locked in the museum cabinet of the past. A face can do it, or a phrase, a reference in a footnote, or the first persimmons blazing in the market (she loved persimmons with a passion). *Look, but don't touch*: the brutal law of memory, familiar to all who acquire adult experience of time. In this case, the effects are peculiarly potent: Leslie and I have no contact whatsoever.

It is a powerful act, this absolute disowning of someone with whom one has shared a bed and so much of consciousness over many years. It means that—for the disowned one, anyway—the relationship with the disowner, which of course does not end but continues in the mind, becomes peculiarly stunted. The disowned must imagine her former intimate without the benefit of periodic emotional updates that inform less strict estrangements. She conjures a hulking shape in a shadow theater, a crude projection from obsolete history.

Leslie's tenacious silence combines with her status as my only long-term woman lover to grant her enormous power in my imagination. I have to admit that our rupture has had its advantages, sparing me prolonged and vocal acrimony. But in fact I don't need to hear her grief and rage restated. They came through loud and clear the first time. They reverberate.

Divorce is the continuation of marriage by other means.

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My separation from my lesbian world, though far less absolute, has been equally painful. It has required giving up that sense of being among the elect that my lesbian feminist identity furnished in return for its exorbitant demands on my sense of political duty. It has entailed admitting that, like lots of other modern people (and I don't mean just the queer ones), I have asked desire to do entirely too much—to symbolize the whole of who and what I am. I have gazed too long upon that apparition Foucault wickedly termed a "sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected—the dark shimmer of sex."

I was unprepared for identity loss. Unlike my gradual, almost leisurely transition to loving women, my exit from dykedom was a rout, disorderly and graceless. In the

midst of two divorces, I had precious little chance to distinguish between my feelings about separating from the women's community and my guilt and sadness about leaving Leslie. My own bewildered reactions to being involved with a man tended to get confused with others' negative judgments. As a lesbian writer, I had publicized my sex life, purposely questioning boundaries between personal choices and group objectives. Now I was stuck with having those choices treated as community property.

Not that reactions were uniformly hostile; my closest lesbian friends behaved like friends, prioritizing me above political symbolism, while many in the larger lesbian community reacted with generous reassurance, or simply didn't care. But I could never count on kindness, much less approval, nor predict when I'd be ambushed by accusations of betrayal. I found myself on perpetual red alert, braced for attacks from my erstwhile home base. The syndrome was all too familiar from the Cloud, and though I liked to think of myself as strong at the broken places, my new notoriety inevitably evoked acrid memories of a previous rush to judgment.

It did not occur to me to hold on to lesbianism via the obvious route of insisting on the label. I thought, in fact, that I was who I used to be—I certainly felt like the same person—but I did not deign to beg, to make myself ridiculous. Besides, I needed time to get my bearings. "I don't want to take a position on my body before I'm sure what position my body's in," I quipped. But it was hard to keep quiet and simply watch my own behavior when I was always under pressure to explain, to put words to interactions and feelings for which there is no ready-made language.

I was struck by how often lesbians inquired what I planned to call myself, almost as though the absence of a name for my condition were more upsetting than my actual behavior. Evidently stigma inhered in my floating status. Perhaps, I thought, I was something like the kiki, the neither butch nor femme lesbian looked down on within the rigidly role-identified bar culture of the fifties. I myself retained many vestiges of my old, dualistic frame of reference; I remember, for instance, discussing with my good friend and former magazine coeditor Leba the possible implications of sleeping with a man over various lengths of time. While it seemed unlikely that sex with Benjamin had instantly turned me into someone radically different from who I'd been when I was Les's lover, what would happen if he and I stayed together? How many months or years would it take to change me into that alien life form, a heterosexual woman?

I kept being embarrassed by people who hadn't heard of my disgrace and expected me to function as a normal lesbian. Was I then obliged to come out in reverse? Though it seemed an unfair burden, I usually opted for full disclosure. Just as I'd once feared that real dykes would accuse me of exploitative behavior if I acted on my attractions to women without first renouncing men, so I now dreaded being charged with hypocrisy if I didn't wear dishonor on my sleeve.

Yet it wasn't so easy to represent myself in a way that felt accurate. When my old flame Marge Bannerman solicited work from me for a new anthology (reflective of a new atmosphere of cross-gender cooperation, this one would include both gay male and lesbian poetry), I carefully explained my delicate situation to her. Not only was she not at all shocked, but she said that she still regarded the poem she had in mind as a lesbian poem. I agreed that it was and said I'd be honored to have her reprint it—and soon was harshly reproved by a self-appointed member of the identity police who

thought I'd forfeited my rights to any further association with dyke culture.

I knew full well how the binary schematism of the sexual and gender politics I myself had long pursued supported that conclusion. In that view of things, I was now a de facto het, drenched in privilege galore, happily ensconced in a world made for me, where every aspect of the culture from opera to advertising ceaselessly endorsed—nay, promoted—my “lifestyle.” I didn't need lesbians; I had everybody else.

How else could I fathom the logic involved when Shirley and Mariah both cut me off without a word of explanation? While they'd been closer to Les than to me, I'd always considered that I had an independent relationship with each of them and couldn't imagine that they'd decided to ostracize me simply because I'd broken up with her. They were treating me like an enemy, an other, someone who had ceased to merit the same consideration as would a lesbian, a comrade.

My loyal lesbian friends clued me in on some pretty unpleasant gossip, evidence that a lot of women loving women expected me to know my place, go back to hethood quietly. Yet I felt profoundly placeless, my outlook and concerns far less comprehensible to most of the heterosexuals with whom I interacted than to even those lesbians who were most critical of me. When I answered questions about the nature of my writing, challenged heterosexist thinking, or spoke of Emma as my daughter and then needed to clarify the nature of the nonbiological connection—in short, when I revealed almost anything of myself—straights immediately saw me as a dyke. Then I'd have to decide whether to explain I had a male lover, in which case I'd feel doubly exposed. (For if masculinist thinking has positioned lesbianism as a sort of running sexual-moron joke—what a hoot that any woman should remain indifferent to the obvious attractions of the phallus!—then how much more hilarious is her eventual recognition that she can't, after all, live without the blasted thing.)

With straight and queer alike, I now discovered, I was going to be repeatedly misperceived unless I divulged intimate details of my sexual history, details of a sort that members of the former group are almost never required to furnish to mere acquaintances and that even the latter can generally reduce to a dignified formula (I'm gay). I found myself recalling a patriotic tale I'd been forced to read in school. In Edward Everett Hale's *The Man Without a Country*, Philip Nolan is punished for expressing a laudable if impolitic sentiment (“Damn the United States—I wish I may never hear of the United States again!”) with exile to the high seas where he is forever deprived of news of his native land. I felt like Philip, always between ports. If in some sense I'd chosen the life of a floating woman—if I'd proven, in the end, not much more loyal a citizen of Lesbian Nation than of my local nation-state—still I did not think my choice merited my expulsion from all familiar territory.

Early in 1989, now thoroughly familiar with the peculiar symptoms of identity loss, I decided to write an essay using my own recent history as a point of departure for raising certain questions about the politics of desire. In a way, it was just another chapter of the project I'd been engaged in for many years: exploring *how* the personal is political. But “My Interesting Condition,” as I called the piece, would also conveniently announce my new status to the lesbian reading public, thereby cutting down on the frequency with which I'd have to break the news in person, a chore that seemed to recur with irksome regularity although it was now well over a year since I'd ended things with Leslie. I liked the idea of making a resolute gesture, of insisting,

in writing, not only on being who I was, but on trying to understand it.

I knew I was breaking precedent by talking publicly, and in a queer context, about experiences that challenged the fixed boundaries (more accurately, the rule of one-way-only border crossing) at the heart of lesbian feminist ideology. But I did not foresee the bitter indignation that would greet my rejection of what amounted to a woman-identified closet: the pervasive, embarrassed silence about lesbians' "straight" attractions, attractions that were, I was discovering, far more common than I'd supposed. As soon as word about my relationship with Benjamin began to get around, I started hearing from women in parallel situations, including some who'd recently slept with men but still identified as dykes. Apparently ours had become the latest edition of the love that dare not speak its name.

"My Interesting Condition" was published in 1990 in *OUT/LOOK* magazine with the provocative tag "When Lesbians Fall for Men." The editors highlighted its shock value by running as cover art a cheeky graphic depicting a woman's upper body. She's wearing denim with a plunging neckline; a glimpse of cleavage forms the backdrop to a hovering winged Cupid who aims his fatal dart—a male circle-and-arrow symbol—at the DYKE button pinned to her left breast. Because *OUT/LOOK*, now defunct, was then the premier U.S. lesbian and gay quarterly, the publication effectively made my announcement to a national audience. The negative reaction was swift and powerful, like the recoil from an automatic rifle.

But what blew me away wasn't just the negativity but the mix of reactions, including highly positive ones. More than any piece of writing I've sent out into the world, "My Interesting Condition" functioned like a Rorschach test. I sometimes had trouble believing that the selfsame sentences and paragraphs could arouse such wildly disparate reactions.

I reaped the whirlwind of indignation in slow motion, at first primarily through letters to the editor that *OUT/LOOK* forwarded to me before publishing a sample. Many were of the "cancel my subscription" genre. One woman maintained that I might rationalize until I was "blue in the cunt" without producing anything more than a "vaginal veil" for my "failures as a woman-identified woman." Another protested that she did not want to open a gay and lesbian publication only to "read about how wonderful heterosexual fucking is."

Infuriated readers like these didn't bother to address a range of issues I'd raised, among them my conjecture that controversies over dykes who sleep with men mask a deeply threatening, seldom discussed divide "between women who can 'pass' and those who can't, between women who love women but *appear* less threatening to the straight world and women who . . . fit the stereotype of the butch lesbian and are brutally punished for it." But the circle of my critics extended considerably beyond those women who went ballistic at the "sex with a man" issue. A few months after the essay came out, I was stunned by an encounter with a writer I'd been friendly with for years, someone I'd always seen as being on the side of erotic diversity. She berated me for my frankness about the problems I'd experienced with lesbian community life, implying that by being less than totally positive, I'd unilaterally wrecked the chances for dykes to engage in a needed discussion about their attractions to men.

I heard secondhand of the negative rumblings from around the country. "People were yanking your books off syllabi right and left," said a feminist I met recently,

recalling ancient outrage in San Diego. It's a most peculiar feeling, when you're not even famous, to know that perfect strangers will have heard you called a traitor. Scandal, I've noticed, tends to decay in half-lives, and this one, which at the moment of detonation seemed appreciably less toxic than the Cloud, certainly has more staying power.

While the angriest critics of "My Interesting Condition" apparently saw it as a frontal assault on dykedom, the many women who called or wrote to thank me, most of whom had lived the conflicts it described, seemed to read it as a tribute. They responded viscerally to my descriptions of fear, guilt, and self-blame; they, too, mourned an identity and community they deemed irreplaceable. "I'm going through, almost verbatim, a lot of what you're going through. . . . [Your article] has put me more in touch with my sadness, isolation, loss, and pride." "I have never felt so alone. This is so much more difficult than 'coming out' as a lesbian was for me. There isn't even a name for this process." "I realize that I still believe being a lesbian is superior to being straight. Until I let go of that one, I'm rather doomed . . . I long for and ache for the (lesbian) community."

Today I'm struck by the way in which such disparate reactions suggest, underneath their surface opposition, a similar loneliness and fear of abandonment. One of the angriest letter writers suspends her raging long enough to observe poignantly: "Lesbianism is not taken seriously in this world. It is invisible, it's treated as a joke, a titillation, an act in 3-ring circus talk shows or a way to taint a woman who gets out of line." She and my supporters both fear that their sexual choices will leave them fatally isolated. While conflict raged, however, I was hardly above the fray. It stung me to see my arguments caricatured, to be portrayed as a stock character in a crude drama of heroines and sellouts.

Now I can see that divorce is, indeed, the continuation of family by other means. The quarrel located me deep in lesbian space even as it focused on the effort to expel me. Even in 1990 I could dimly perceive that the Sturm und Drang had to do not so much with the actual contours of my story as with the way in which its broad outlines evoked the familiar tale of uneven competition between a "real" lesbian and a heterosexual man for the allegiance of an indecisive, erotically impressionable female (read: a "real" woman). The classic version of this drama, perhaps *the* central trope whereby the modern West has imagined lesbianism, unfolds as an exercise in phallic vindication: the person with the penis gets the girl. (And not always for the reason one might think: in Colette's *Le Pur et l'impur*, a dizzy femme named Loulou returns to her husband not for the sex but out of humiliation that her woman lover "can't do *pipi* against a wall.") Over and above the real-world pressures of "compulsory heterosexuality," it is largely thanks to the power of this plot that the figure of the bisexual traitor has acquired, within lesbian culture itself, such a strong symbolic valence. That single, simple image stands for a myriad of ways in which the social world is stacked against women who love women.

It wasn't merely that I'd transgressed the party line; in sleeping with a man and then writing about it, I'd morphed into the tender villain of the classic lesbian nightmare. I was Verena Tarrant bailing out of her Boston marriage with the feminist Olive Chancellor to marry Basil Ransom in Henry James's *The Bostonians*, deemed

by the lesbian critic Terry Castle “the first and perhaps the most haunting ‘lesbian tragedy’ in modern English and American literature.” I was Nellie March in D.H. Lawrence’s *The Fox*, marrying the man who’d felled a tree on top of her lover Jill Banford. In Radclyffe Hall’s much scorned yet eternally influential *The Well of Loneliness*, I was shallow Angela Crossby, the blue-eyed vamp who taunts mannish lesbian Stephen Gordon with the infinitely cruel, “Could you marry me, Stephen?” then betrays her to sate a coarse physical passion for a *real* man, Roger Antrim.

Though one might expect old tropes to wither away in an era in which it has become commonplace for women to leave men for other women, my experience reveals that “leaving a woman for a man” is still the lesbian equivalent of mortal sin. Like the anger some Black women feel about sex between white women and African-American men, the rage this archetypal trespass against dykedom provokes is first and foremost a protest against social inequality rather than a response to individual behavior, the particulars of which may seem irrelevant in light of symbolic injury.

I know, of course, that the heterosexist order is the big enemy. If women’s passions for other women were taken seriously and made to feel at home everywhere, then presumably nobody would have much interest in outing or ostracizing dykes who sleep with men. Yet that is no justification for policing identity, a tactic that ultimately recoils on the very groups in whose name it is implemented. If I have to falsify my experience in order to fight beside you—if, in effect, I have to pretend that I’m queer in precisely the same way as you or be viewed as some sort of half-caste hanger-on; if I can’t feel that it’s my battle, too—then how can I wholeheartedly fight the good fight? Sexual minorities unwilling to acknowledge the fact that many people are neither gay nor straight encourage the liminal to falsify their lives for the sake of fitting in. Queer nations that deport “disloyal” citizens cut off their noses to spite their faces.

Recently, a bisexual activist suggested to me that if “My Interesting Condition” were published today, the reception might be quite different. She’s certainly right that over the past few years many women and men have publicly and privately contested the rule of either/or identities. The bisexual movement itself, and the acknowledgment it has won for “both/and” behavior within lesbian and gay groups; the spread of the tendency to identify as “queer,” a term invested with connotations of erotic fluidity; the fact that many unstraight young people seem disinclined to swear erotic fealty to a single gender—all are hopeful signs of old rigidities on the wane.

Yet I’m not so sure that all’s changed utterly. Repeatedly in the years since my own fall from grace, lesbian communities nationwide have been rocked by dramatic reverse outings. The musician Holly Near roiled the waters by acknowledging her involvement with a man around the time of my *OUT/LOOK* article. In 1995, the filmmaker Maria Maggenti (*The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*) published an essay on “Falling for a Guy” in the *Village Voice*. More recently, a reverse outing scandal involving JoAnn Loulan, a popular speaker and author of widely read handbooks on lesbian sexuality, was reported in national gay media. Apparently rites of outrage still serve a collective purpose, helping to affirm group membership and delineating the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Implicit in the bisexual activist’s comment is the more important question of the status of either/or eroticism in the world at large. For it is this larger context that

provides the implicit setting for local practice within specific communities of sexual dissenters, even as those communities strive to innovate. And so long as the dominant assumption remains that there are two and only two basic ways to be sexual, even the lives of those who know better will have to be lived largely in relation to the structures that that assumption has put in place.

Throughout the nineties, even as bisexual movements and queer politics have contested rigid sexual boundaries, countervailing forces have exerted enormous influence on public perceptions of sexual identity. Fueled by the prestige of contemporary genetic science, the craze for biological explanations of all sorts of human behavior has given a boost to “born that way” theories of erotic attraction. Meanwhile, high-profile campaigns for basic rights for gay men and lesbians have been conducted along lines that reinforce the idea that the human norm is orientation to one gender *or* the other. This has occurred in part because many gay rights advocates believe in the universality of fixed orientations, but also because they tend to model their efforts on those of U.S. racial and ethnic minorities—groups that have traditionally grounded successful antidiscrimination arguments in their perceived (if fictive) status as stable, biologically distinct populations. Obsessive media coverage of scientists’ efforts to identify possible biological influences on sexuality (commonly reported in oversimplified terms that foster notions of genetic determination not claimed by the researchers themselves); debates on gays in the military; campaigns for the legalization of lesbian and gay marriage; controversies over the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy; and some conservative gay male pundits’ insistence that gays renounce the delights of erotic experimentation have all generated large doses of propaganda for an either/or vision of human sexuality.

The visionary historian Jonathan Ned Katz (author of *Gay American History* and *The Invention of Heterosexuality*) has recently argued that “a radical leveling of the old homo/hetero distinction” is under way as a logical consequence of the legitimation of same-gender sexual relations. I couldn’t agree with him more on the need for what he calls “a new pleasure system,” but it’s my view that, while sexual identity borders are indeed growing somewhat more porous, they’re unlikely to dissolve any time soon. Instead, they show signs of being reconstituted on a basis that may grudgingly allow for a marginalized “both/and” option even as straight and gay identities are increasingly viewed as mutually exclusive (and mutually reinforcing) versions of the “normal.” Given relentless gay baiting from the right, it is understandable why such a modification appeals to large numbers of same-gender lovers despite its conservative, constricting implications.

When depressed by this prospect, however, I have only to frame the issues in a somewhat different way to feel a burst of optimism. North America is on the verge of being rocked by a groundswell of interest in experiences that transcend, subvert, or defy either/or expectations embedded in received categories of race, nation, and culture, as well as gender and sexuality. Just one index of the phenomenon is literary: a flood of memoirs about biraciality and multiracial families; works about transborder experiences of exile and immigration; fiction and theory from postcolonial perspectives; critical reflections on whiteness; and books by writers like Eva Hoffman and Ariel Dorfman who explore bilingualism as a window on the self’s multiplicity.

The questions raised by such work intersect with the contestations of queers, bisexuals, transgendered people, and others who, like Katz, favor a new pleasure system, or who claim a link to traditional sex/gender systems that simply don't translate into either/or terms (for instance, those Native Americans who call themselves Two Spirit People). Often the intersection is explicit, as in the writings of the Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, whose work explores what the title of one of her books designates *Borderlands/La Frontera*, an image encompassing same-gender eroticism, bilingualism, and the U.S.-Mexican border as connected sites of cultural and political resistance. Writing like this catalyzes, while it also reflects, significant shifts in the way large numbers of us are living and imagining our lives. I believe it signals a powerful if nameless cultural movement: an identity politics for a *really* new millennium.

Beyond identity categories, we all face the puzzle of how best to foster justice in a complicated world in which "shared oppression" is less than ever a simple mechanical binding force. The unity required for effective social action always exists as an achievement in time, tenuous and precious—a leap-stagger-crawl-wobble-cartwheel-pirouette across the Gulf of Loneliness, the indelible uniqueness that divides each "I" from others.

I at first experienced my own namelessness, my floating-woman status, primarily as absence, in the form I've referred to here as identity loss. For not only had my leftish version of lesbian feminism supplied a seemingly unbeatable solution to my problem being a woman, not only had it provided a powerful, supple language in which to articulate my criticisms of a world that imposed unacceptable conditions for belonging, but it had supplied a name for my lifelong inner difference, a sense of being a stranger in the land that couldn't readily be accounted for in the familiar terms of race or class, ethnicity or religion. Now I was up against the obvious: my story wasn't really that of the homosexual-as-outcast. My same-gender attractions weren't the cause of my outsiderhood; indeed, it seemed quite likely that I'd come by the courage to insist on my feelings for women even though I *could* do men precisely because I already felt so marginal. Now I feared being banished from the company of misfits and consigned to the pastel hell of normalcy deemed appropriate for class- and skin-privileged women who lapsed from deviance.

Instead, no longer sustained by a tightly woven community, I've tapped into a network of serendipitous connection. My companions are the conscious border dwellers, conscientious objectors to an order of things that would divide us from each other, ourselves from our selves. We share a honed awareness of those daily negotiations necessary to inventing less segregated lives, unmaking the architecture of constructed misery.

So there's Elise, my dear friend from prelapsarian days, lesbian fiction writer and teacher of English in a mostly Black college. Jewish (she grew up middle-class in Boston with European family roots), she lives now with her English lover (working-class background, Ph.D.) and a biracial daughter they've adopted. We sit in her back yard and gossip about old loves and the ins and outs of our quotidian border crossings: our perplexity at the West Indian fondness, shared by her students and Benjamin's relatives, for telephone guessing games ("hello, good evening, who do

you think this is calling?”); how she’ll deal with the two vocal Christian fundamentalists when it’s time to come out to her English honors class; how strangers inflict their racial curiosity on a two-and-a-half-year-old (the bus driver kept badgering her daughter, “Where did you get that curly, curly hair?” until the child replied, “From my head!”).

There’s Ollie, my pal from the Sister City delegation, whose suggestion that I apply for a job as a writing teacher in the innovative liberal arts college where he works led me fortuitously back into the world of organized learning. That foray has allowed me to revisit, this time as a teacher with a modicum of power, some of the questions about education’s relevance that so vexed me at Reed. Ollie and I and our writing program colleagues constantly discuss the political dynamics that surface in our classrooms and the multiple ways in which student writing bears on issues of identity and power.

There’s my friend who writes about being the white mother of Black sons. My friend who writes prose in English, poems in Spanish, splicing together gay Manhattan and his native Colombia. My friend who makes intricate, poetic videos about growing up African-Italian-American. My friend who grew up Black and queer in Arkansas, cut his teeth on texts by lesbians of color, and is using Foucault in an analysis of interactions in a gay bar in Bed-Stuy.

There are my students, full of staccato energy, tenderness and anger and despair and itchy hope. The earnest young poet, an immigrant from Haiti, whose spoken English betrays no trace of a Creole accent, yet who struggles for an elusive fluency in written prose: “When I first came to college, you know, I wanted those big words—I wanted them so bad! But now I realize you’ve got to start from where you are.” The student from New Hampshire who uses my writing assignments to invoke the peer torture so often inflicted on gay boys, and to remember the power of ACT UP’s Ashes Project, a protest in which the cremated remains of people with AIDS were dumped on the White House lawn. The Latina in an otherwise all-white class who reads a beautifully written short story about a Mexican-American waitress and is challenged on the use of two untranslated words of Spanish by a student who insists that they hinder reader comprehension. The white woman whose unsentimental memoir of rural poverty includes her rueful acknowledgment of longing to be one of the “more Advanced Lesbians,” instead of a wishy-washy “bisexual.”

And then there’s Benjamin, sturdy voyager through the stations of the Caribbean diaspora. His Carriacou childhood of agricultural labor meant that in Patio Grande he distinguished himself as the sole member of our Brooklyn group who could handle a machete; his British colonial education, Virgil and all, now makes him the Latin expert in his Manhattan law office.

With time, I’ve come to see that being a floating woman suits me. Certainly it seems to me far preferable to making a career of serial identity. My boycott of descriptive language for my sexuality is, I freely acknowledge, a quixotic strategy, one I certainly wouldn’t recommend to those who feel they really *are* gay or straight or bi, or who don’t mind making do with simple terms even as they acknowledge underlying complexities. (Here’s how one male reader of “My Interesting Condition” explained to me why a gay identity felt perfectly consistent with his history of some

acknowledged desire for women: “If the world makes an issue of my cocksucking, so will I and besides, men are the true north on my sexual compass.”) It’s less a utopian gesture, for I don’t pretend to know what erotopia would look like, than a personal protest against an either/or so entrenched that it’s hard to envision what will supersede it.

The perplexities of living label-less underscore the fact that large areas of social life depend on an expectation that everyone can reliably be slotted into an appropriate sexual category. I’ve had to reevaluate what it means to be “out.” At first I mostly ignored the problem, accepting the common wisdom that sexual self-description is a pressing issue only for those whose current involvements or official identities would otherwise be misinterpreted. (I now think of this as the snapshot approach to erotic biography, the implication being that a glimpse of any moment tells us all we need to know about a person’s past and future.) I’d taken in my critics’ angry message that I was now as good as straight and should behave accordingly.

Then I began to feel uneasy about the assumptions straight people made about me because my partner was a man. I began to resent the *de facto* closeting that resulted from my minimalist approach to discussing my personal life with coworkers, students, and others I met who knew little of my background; in my horror of those assumptions, I avoided mentioning Benjamin, preferring to leave my private life blank, as gay people often feel constrained to do. This issue of how to present myself, what to emphasize or occlude, remains a persistent problem for me, as indeed it is for so many whose life circumstances challenge stereotypical expectations (the members of a multiracial family, the very light-skinned person of African descent, the transsexual). It’s as though I’m accompanied by a shadowy double, the person (dyke or straight) I think I’m being imagined as. I’m calculating how to deal with misperceptions, whether to debunk, ignore, or encourage them. Very often I feel I’m passing. I don’t always know for what.

In the company of lesbians and gay men, I try to come off as “socially gay”—comfortable in gay surroundings, attuned to gay issues, fluent in gay lingo. And it’s not that I’m pretending—I *am* all these things—but without the backup of a solid identity, I’m extra aware of the need to give a credible performance. I do a fair amount of socializing on my own in lesbian and gay circles, in part because Benjamin tends to be ill at ease with groups of people, but also because it just feels easier to keep the worlds separate.

When my worlds collide, a thing like this can happen: in the spring of 1995, I accepted an invitation from a student friend to join a group of people mobilized by ACT UP in protesting cuts to New York City’s health care budget. The plan was for a civil disobedience action that would block the Queens Midtown Tunnel at rush hour. At my suggestion, Benjamin volunteered legal help. Arriving late to the planning meeting, he caused a little flap, as several activists scurried around the room with news that a cop might have just walked in the door. It was true enough that his was a stranger’s face, and that, plotting illegal doings, they had reason to be cautious, but I wondered later if he would have been singled out had he been an unfamiliar white kid in ragged jeans and body piercing, instead of his dark-skinned, neatly dressed, fiftyish self. There might have been sixty or seventy people in that room, and only four were visibly Black; I feared the incident reflected racist “othering,” as well as clashing

styles of sexual self-presentation.

At the opposite extreme, the life of a floating woman takes in staid hetero gatherings such as the potluck dinners organized by the residents of Benjamin's and my famously integrated, slightly stuffy, heart-of-Caribbean-Brooklyn community, a tiny island of middle-class property owners in a poorer, heavily immigrant neighborhood. So important, evidently, is the illusion of uniform mores (already somewhat disturbed by our interracial presence on a block where most families are neatly Black *or* White) that some of our neighbors speak of me as "Mrs." or casually refer to Benjamin as my husband. I do not correct them, not wanting to rock the boat (what would I say? how on earth could I convey the importance to me of *not* being legally married?), but I always wince, thinking, What if dykes could see me now?

That thought returned in force at my parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration, an extravaganza they planned years ahead of time, wanting to ensure that not only their three daughters but each of our partners would be present. There we sat, pouring champagne: my mother and father, my two sisters and their husbands, Benjamin and I, plus my youngest sister's son. Though not quite keen enough on reproducing ourselves, we formed in other respects a picture of spotless family values (liberal ones, of course, given the token integration). And while sure that a woman partner of mine would have been accepted there, I also believed that the Noah's Ark symmetry was gratefully, if unconsciously, noted by most of those present as an enhancement of the occasion. Had I shown up with a woman, I'd have reminded everyone that heterosexual pairing is not a universal desideratum, and that would have been a discomfiting reminder.

For just as my parents' wedding album once conveyed to me not merely a notion of something private they'd done but an impression of a clearly all-important institution, so now we were in effect celebrating not only their marriage, but hetero coupling generally (and lifelong monogamy to boot!). This is part of the point of major social rituals: they are not simply individual acts but partake of and reinforce some very large assumptions about how the world is put together. I wished there had been a chance to honor my parents' love and its contribution to their children's lives without symbolically exalting their way over all others, but that didn't seem to be an option. No longer quite the Bartleby I was in days of yore, I played my part in the heteronormative pageant.

Tugging against my unease at the world's eagerness to assimilate my mode of loving to its model of matrimony is the temptation to accept almost any acknowledgment that Benjamin and I belong together. Though some of my insecurity has faded with time, I'm still sensitive to the many negative assumptions that might be made about us as an interracial couple. Many years ago in Grenada, he tells me, people used to say that a man who moved to England and married a white woman must have plucked her from the gutter. His own relatives have welcomed me, allaying many of my fears, but I'm not sure I was wrong to have been careful. My being white seemed difference enough. Could I blame anyone who might have had the thought: She wasn't supposed to be looking at men in the first place. Did she have to pick a *Black* one?

Of course I puzzle over the luck of this selection, the impulsive rightness of it, on both my part and Benjamin's, when by external measures we ought not to fit. Being happy, I've sometimes wished we could have met when we were younger, only to realize that we probably got together at the earliest moment when the relationship could have worked.

Not until middle age did the factors that connect us work their way, as it were, to the surface of our lives. Young, we were occupied in sorting out the implications of precisely those circumstances that make us seem an unlikely pair, and we would have been no help to each other in that process. I can't imagine that I would have been favorably impressed by Benjamin's youthful, exuberant heteromascularity, nor would my North American naiveté have been an asset as he pondered his relationship to a postcolonial homeland.

Given my deep suspicion of traditional straight roles, it was crucial that I bring to this relationship a fully adult sense of my vocation as a writer and my identity as a political progressive. I believe, in fact, that my shakiness in these areas undermined my relationship with Les; with a male partner, things could only have been worse. Now I feel I'm on my own in a way I never was before. I like the fact that Benjamin and I have completely separate professions. I experience no temptation to look up to him, insecure and self-critical. We meet on the level.

By the time we got together, I'd long ago ceased to think of dealing with race as the optional pursuit so many whites consider it to be. Largely thanks to my immersion in antiracist lesbian circles, I'd learned that, much in the way I'd done with gender, I could modify not the fact but the meaning of my whiteness. I'd gotten past lamenting the sorry history attached to my skin color and developed a personal stake in transforming the racial order of things. Thus the issues facing an interracial couple came as no big surprise to me. Further, my years in a lesbian family had accustomed me to societal disapproval of my chosen forms of intimacy, so it felt familiar to anticipate occasional hostility and pervasive incomprehension. (In fact, when it comes to negotiating everyday life, I've found it easier to be he-she but interracial, though I realize that impression is a function of context. I'm especially chary of travel to rural areas that are either mostly white or historically segregated.)

All of this preparation helps, but it can't neutralize the social toxins in the air we breathe. So we avoid solemnity wherever possible. We joke a lot, compare, play "I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours." Lesbians, I inform Benjamin, are hugely entertained by research indicating that the average heterosexual encounter takes less time than the average coffee break. "Black people are too!" he replies. "We figure those studies get done on a bunch of ofays!"

He often calls me "'oman," in a voice of parodied command that usually prompts me to answer him back, my uppity rejoinders touching lightly on real anxieties about being "his woman" in a gender-unequal world. Simultaneously, the routine underscores the absurdity of his pretending to possess, simply on account of being male, a woman whose class and skin privilege place her out of reach of that sort of domination. Last but not least, his affectionate undertone allows me to indulge in the fantasy of being "'oman," not "woman," in other words, of "belonging" to him, and *with* him, in the closer way I sometimes imagine I might if I were from home, talked

Carriacou talk, had survived Hurricane Janet and West Indian parental discipline, knew the taste of fry bakes and tree-ripened mango—or even if I’d simply been African-American. For to me, the most painful, threatening effect of societal racism on this relationship is its relentless divisiveness. Gay and lesbian partners are at least in the same boat, usually bearing the brunt of homophobia together, whereas the de facto segregation of North American life silently but relentlessly insists that my lover and I belong in separate and unequal places.

Yet Benjamin and I have this in common, at least: our respective race-and-gender identities put both of us in positions that simultaneously entail entitlement and social disadvantage. While wary of the mistake of mechanically equating very different forms of disempowerment (as 1960s white feminists used to do when they drew on the imagery of racial oppression to make the case against male chauvinism), I think that the analogies in our situations have facilitated our empathy with each other in ways that complement, although they can never substitute for, our political commitment to each other’s liberation.

Our path, too, is smoothed considerably by our current rough equivalence in socioeconomic status. Almost as though we hadn’t taken such disparate routes to get there, we meet on common ground, reading the *New York Times* and discussing mortgage refinancing. In a far more dramatic and telescoped version of my own family’s now distant bootstrap efforts, Benjamin has moved from agricultural subsistence to a prestigious profession and comfortable salary. Meanwhile I, having exercised my privilege by rejecting it for much of my adult life, have begun to earn a precarious middle-class income. The pattern holds for formal education, as well, Benjamin holding a doctorate in history as well as a law degree, while I, the college dropout, recently completed a master’s program. Having been poor, he lacks my defensive attitude toward the bourgeois amenities—our spacious house foremost among them—that cushion our life together.

But none of this, of course, really explains our affinity, which is a question of persons and not of categories. I am with Benjamin because we suit each other; because our interests, quirks, and passions are complementary; because we’re runners and vegetarians and food co-op stalwarts, gleeful spotters of errors in grammar and word usage, compulsives when it comes to household cleanliness; because in early childhood we felt acute separation from everything around us. Because we talk about South Africa’s class structure and police brutality and *Bowers v. Hardwick* at the breakfast table; because we’re Luddites and throwbacks, defiers of market forces; because we couldn’t care less about passing on our genes; because (as he says) we “hate enthusiasm”; because we please each other in bed.

I like the steadiness of sex with Benjamin—a kind of physical bluntness, a lack of complications. It’s an activity and not a psychodrama. Having experienced the rehabilitation of the femme during the Feminist Sex Wars, I’ve accepted my own facility in performing certain gestures of “surrender,” no longer imagining, as I did at age sixteen, that my pleasure in them indicates my fate to be subjugated. I can indulge the fantasy of opposites attracting (“being a woman for him”) and know it’s just that, good old hetero boilerplate, not some iron law of nature.

Sometimes I think our plain, hard differences make things easier. I can never be Black, I can never be male, I can’t stop seeing the world from my queer, North

American angle of vision. He's completely distinct from me, and while it pleases me to think that his life is enhanced by my presence, I've never felt that I needed to rescue him, or imagined such a thing would even be possible.

And then difference evaporates. Sometimes when I hold him in my mouth, I swear it doesn't feel as though our sexes are "opposite." Any more than our two colors, when no one else is looking.

But enough. I can hear what he'll say when he reads these paragraphs: "Have you gone completely crazy? Don't you remember the goat mouth?" That Carriacou name for the treacherous frailty of luck and happiness. Don't speak aloud of your good fortune. Someone might put their goat mouth on it. Hide it even from yourself, lest it be snatched away from you.

My life has been lived in productive, exhausting tension between the creative clamor of People in Groups and the sumptuous freedom I know alone, where the line between thought and fantasy is blurred, where eros and aesthetics shade into one another, and analysis, too, can be deeply sensuous. At best, I've been able to touch another person without surrendering that freedom.

"Living with you is like living with nobody," Benjamin announces, paying me a compliment. I remember once saying something similar. We'd recently met, I was in the hell of indecision. My therapist asked me how I imagined it would feel to be with him. "As if I were by myself, only someone would be there," I answered instantly, intensely longing for it.

In this protected space I've won, I'm trying to "live inside my story," in the words of a poem I wrote twenty years ago. "How difficult to live inside my story," the piece laments.

But it's the only way for a floating woman to get her bearings.

The trouble with official identities is not what they assert, but what they promise. I've wasted a lot of time trying to live up to labels, or else to live them down. I've fretted over the implications of names that authorized or entrapped me. Now I want a life that can't be paraphrased—my own, with all its imperfections and surprises. Its lack of romantic certainty. Its failure, precisely, to be some other story, to be justified by anything external to itself.

Living inside my story means inside my *full* story, acknowledging the possible future relevance of every portion of my past. It means living inside *my* story, not in awe of someone else's—which has nothing to do, of course, with arrogantly supposing that my tale is central or universal, but only with understanding that this and no other is the one given me to inhabit whole. It means living *inside* my story, not popping outside all the time to check on how I'm doing with the audience, but getting the clearest possible view from where *I* stand.

When I make this effort, a discipline, really, an approximation to an elusive but illuminating goal, then I can voice perennial questions of my responsibility to others in a different register, unconstrained by feminine martyrdom, identity envy, or received notions of proper radical behavior.

Living inside my story allows my fullhearted presence in those places where many stories intersect and complete one another.

To get there, I need a lot of solitude. I find it in a Brooklyn row house, set back from the world somehow, yet only a block from Flatbush Avenue with its music shouting from the record stores, curry goat, urine scent, darting bike riders on the sidewalks. Overlooking a small back garden, my room entertains a quiet that resists the incessant buzz of traffic, children's games, a steel drum next door plunking out "Happy Birthday." From here I watch the lilac bloom and fade, the delicate permutations of the wildflower mix I planted. Always I seem to favor the understated flowers, while my neighbor delights in showy lilies.

Not some other life, but this one.

Who I am is not a noun, but a narrative.

Postscript to the First Edition

IT ALL COMES back to gender, that old flickering heap of meanings.

Our sexual system presupposes that my attraction to certain bodies must logically preclude my attraction to certain others, that male and female are mutually exclusive propositions, both/and a contradiction in terms. This peculiar way of chopping up the world, quite at odds with many people's desires but reinforced by the structures that shape our social interactions, is so ingrained in our thinking about sex that we fail to notice the absurdity in treating a moment of erotic life as an answer, *the* answer, to a standardized test question: gay or straight (bisexual if you must)?

Or perhaps the more appropriate metaphor is that of competitive sport, with each "object choice" racking up points for a gender team. If that's the game, then no wonder some people see my current relationship as a goal scored for the noxious proposition that Men are where it's at.

Nevertheless, I've chosen a man, not Men.

My erotic universe continues to encompass women (and Women). I remain attuned to the allure of "women in multiples," and aware, as well, of seductive undertones in relationships that aren't overtly sexual. I felt a jolt of recognition when a lesbian academic whom I recently heard speak at a panel discussion of queer pedagogy mentioned the "safe" erotic charge she feels with certain attractive young women students. Her comments underscored my awareness of subtle erotic currents that tend to be discounted in a culture whose sexual bias runs consistently toward the literal-minded, graphic, and explicit.

I've chosen a person, but I can't leave it at that, as though somehow all of this happens apart from categories. Because I'm not gender-blind anymore than I'm color-blind, I have to be aware that my gravitation to a male partner repositions me vis-à-vis the gendered world. For, just as our notions of being female and male partake of our perceptions of parental figures who were our earliest models of what it means to inhabit those identities, so our later passions for individuals will inevitably be shaped by broad notions of gender, developed over a lifetime. And thus, in a sense, we *do* touch (not exclusively *choose*) an imagined collective of Women or Men each time we make love with a "person."

In loving a man, I've declared my independence from a notion of Women that threatened to stunt my growth. I've marked off a boundary (flexible, not fixed) between Jan Clausen and People in Groups, asserting my libidinal and artistic autonomy. If, at a prior stage, I "married" my own gender via the affirmation that my lesbian attractions were the true sign of my identity, then this "divorce" acknowledges

that the union was unequal, one in which, as so commonly happens in matrimony, I gave away too much of myself. It proposes that the happiness and pleasure of a real, specific woman take precedence over theories about how Women ought to love.

In the early seventies, I joined a feminist movement made up largely of rebel daughters, ambivalent sisters. We attempted to solve “the problem of being a woman”—which, for many of us, and certainly for me, involved intensely contradictory feelings about our gender—by making Women the center of our lives: “eat rice have faith in women,” as Fran Winant’s poem said. Good advice, except that our ingrained *lack* of faith—our schooling in the intricate forms of self-contempt endemic to dispossessed peoples—was precisely what we needed to overcome. It was like trying to walk on water.

And yet it worked, amazingly, it worked. It worked for me, enabling me to revise what had been a painful, resentful sense of my gender destiny. It taught me to revel in the company of my kind.

But even as it allowed me to participate in a thrilling sense of female possibilities, the awesome importance I attributed to Women undermined my confidence, cramped my range of motion. It encouraged my preexisting tendency to measure my personal worth in terms of services rendered—not, in my mother’s pattern, to biological family, but to lesbian family, lesbian feminist causes, and the imagined community of people with vaginas. I’d eagerly responded to the idealistic summons, “Ask not what your gender can do for you. Ask what you can do for your gender.” I’d given my all and wound up feeling used.

Ambivalence and anger don’t mean an end to passion; Women and I aren’t through, but we’ve entered a brand-new phase. As far as I’m concerned, it’s more mature and realistic now that I’m inclined to balance serving the people with more consistent attention to my own needs.

Like becoming a lesbian, “falling in love with a man” was a situation-specific response—contingent, by no means destined—to a lifelong gender problem. If one of my crushes on women had gotten further, I might have taken the path of some of my still lesbian friends who’ve moved beyond the pressured, incestuous community life of the late seventies and early eighties. They, too, have revised their relationships to Women, in many cases inviting more men—friends and comrades, sons and colleagues—into their inner circles.

But what about me and women in the flesh? Because we invest the fairly minor differences between male and female bodies with such elaborate symbolism, I believe it is really this physical dimension that many people are concerned with when they wonder if my being with a man isn’t a disavowal of my passions for women. It’s a dicey business to try to figure out what in my experience of particular women and men is really a function of gender, not persons—yet of course I compare.

I’ve loved the luxury of women’s bodies, the deep plenitude: fit of pubic bone to hand, vulva’s subtle, strong engorgement. Putting my mouth to the sweet-acid crease, the brave little fist of feeling. I’ve loved a woman’s leisurely arousal, the dallying, meandering, the indulgent sense of time. And the great range of it, the ruthlessness too, no reticence or leisure in the storm of orgasm. I miss making love to women, not their making love to me. Why is that? Do I more easily accept my own body as erotic via male desire? Or could it be an accident, merely, of whom I’ve been with up till

now?

Women are my origin, my people, the speakers of my first language. In those fantasies in which all fulfillments coexist, the circle is unbroken, I return.

It wouldn't be *official*, I feel sure of that. One marriage to a gender was quite enough to last me.

I once believed that the orange hegemony could only be defeated through fidelity to apples. Now I wonder: what sort of apple? A tart organic Macoun or Jonamac, treasures heaped in dusty boxes at the outdoor market in the aster-eyed perfection of late September? A mealy Red Delicious, two seasons past harvest? Or a waxed Granny Smith flown in from New Zealand, consumed on a bitter day in January?

And why only apples? What about mangoes, their flat furry pits, sexually allusive, deposited on the sidewalks along Flatbush Avenue by Trinidadians, Guyanese, rude kids in baggy jeans and solemn hatted old ladies from St. Vincent and Haiti? What about mamones ("mamar" means to suck), like pink, fleshy gumballs in their gray-green carapaces? Or the little red-skinned plums with the sweet amber flesh that I used to find under our neighbor's trees in Eureka? So many fell and perished, a feast for yellow jackets unless I ate them warm from the sun. That ruined orchard was mine for perusing *Reader's Digest* and drowsing in the shade of lichen-tufted branches, dreaming of a garden where I'd live all by myself but never be lonely.

The pure people attract me, but I can't live up to them. Perfection always gets me into trouble. I fear that my quest for the Fountain of Innocence, pursued with the manic zeal of a modern conquistador, has prevented much in the way of discovery. An insistence on being right all the time, squeaky-clean, without fault—on zooming along the high road of progress while getting optimal mileage—betrays an egotistical disregard for the greatness of what just is, the limitless unfolding and becoming that doesn't know or care if we are virtuous or not. It's like asking eternity to ratify a minute. It's also not very realistic.

You say I am mysterious. Let me explain myself. I've been desperate to belong, and to be free. I have lived as though identity were a set of problems to be solved—the problem of being a woman, the problem of desire, the problem of my relation to outsider groups with which I "identified" but couldn't claim literal kinship. I have lived as though identity were a matter of faithfulness. Now I find that it is a series of questions, shaped but not determined by People in Groups.

The paradox of belonging is this: It happens in time. We have to improvise.

Later, other shapes will be possible. Necessary.

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